THE WORLD'S NUMBER ONE PC GAMES MAGAZINE

PC GAMER

INSIDE

First hands-on!
D&D Online: Carnival of Shadows and
City of Heroes: Going Rogue

PLUS

Assassin's Creed 2's Amazing multiplayer!
Dead Space 2's Exploding babies!

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Two six-core CPUs —one surprise winner!

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WORLD OF WARCRAFT CATACLYSM

PC Gamer's Guide to the Apocalypse

PC GAMER

SEPTEMBER 2010

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PLEASE NOTE

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First served



There are certain advantages to being a *PC Gamer* reader. Every month you get a handy, illustrated guide to the very best of PC gaming (one that goes where you go, if you know what I mean). Inside this guide are previews and reviews, of course, but also the most unique feature stories, insightful first-person accounts from virtual worlds, the most authoritative columnists, ingenious How Tos and the best mods, tweaks and free-to-play games harvested from a month of obsessive downloading and play-testing—so you can enjoy just the cream of the crop without all the hunting and gathering. Plus, you're intelligent, cosmopolitan and extremely good-looking.

So all that's the cake. The icing is the exclusive stuff, the you-heard-it-here-first juicy details that we get because we've been around for a dog's age, and in that time we've accumulated a ton of embarrassing dirt on developers that we don't hesitate to use against them if they hold out on us. And holy smokes did we bring home the bacon this month, with the world's first look and hands-on test of the *Lord of the Rings Online* expansion as well as the first details on what you can expect from the free-to-play transformation. We've also got the world's first look and play-test of the dark side of *City of Heroes* in the *Going Rogue* expansion. Oh, and, *what's this*? The world's first look and grubby hands-on of *Dungeons & Dragons Online*'s new adventure pack?

No need to thank us. It's what we do. And if you just can't wait for next month's issue to enjoy the privileges of being a *PCG* reader, then check out our brand-new epic website at **www.pcgamer.com**, devoted exclusively to PC games. Why not? With today's mobile devices, you can even take that with you when you go where you go.



LOGAN DECKER
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WHODUNIT



Josh Augustine
Associate Editor
LOTRO is going subscriptionless and Josh explores an area of Middle-earth so new, it doesn't have a name yet on page 18.



Tim Edwards
Editor (*PC Gamer* UK)
Tim ventured into the belly of the beast to playtest the new *WoW* expansion, *Cataclysm*. Read his exploits on page 48.



Erik Belsaas
Alpha Intern
With AMD and Intel competing for the most confusing six-core CPU name, who can tell which is best? Erik can, on page 92.



Dan Fitzpatrick
Lead Designer
Dan took simple pleasure from drawing faces on CPUs on page 92, and learned the location of Belgium while making page 12.

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Your emails, Facebooks, Twitters, and yes, we still get the occasional letter

BACK CHATTER

- I've tried just about every MMO only to be disappointed and head back to *WoW*, but this time it will be different. I believe in Bioware—*KotOR* was awesome! **@Kingfluffy**

- You claim that it's obvious that *Half-Life 2* is better than the first *Half-Life*? As my grandma used to say, "For shame!" Sorry, but any game whose final battle is with an unarmed old man who's trying to run away can't be good. **Daniel Elliot** (to fellow Facebooker)

- Thanks for getting me hooked on *LOVE*; the podcast interview got me interested and the recent publication really affirmed it. One of the most fun and intuitive, games I've ever played. **Alex Cull**

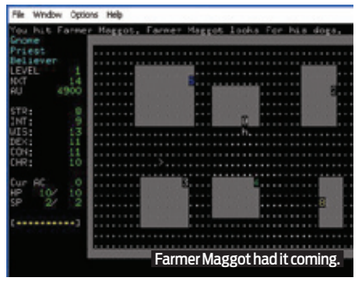
- OMG, someone murdered my favorite web novel, Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033*, by turning it into a so-so game! **Edwin Stark**

- There's never enough power, performance, and amazingness in a computer for PC gaming! There's always something better three seconds after you buy your new computer...I love it—something to constantly look forward to! **Jason DeWalt**

Keep it secret, keep it safe

I enjoyed your article about the best games to play at work (May 2010), but you forgot the biggest factor that makes a game good for the office: being "low key" so your boss doesn't catch on. My at-work games need to be playable in a window, have no telltale bright colors or graphics and allow you to click away without pausing. Some of my favorites are *Angband*, *The Puerto Rico Evolver* and *Dwarf Fortress*. I'd love to hear recommendations from other "hardcore" work gamers like me that read the magazine. **Jackson**

You heard the man! Tell us what your favorite games to play at work are so we can pass your recommendations along our secret underground gaming railroad. PC Gamer: *sneaking games to bored, cubicle-confined gamers everywhere since 1994.* **PCG**



Farmer Maggot had it coming.

UnBIOSed reporting

PCG's PC Builder's Bible (Spring 2010) is the best "how to build a gaming PC" guide I've read. Most only cover how to assemble the hardware, not how to properly install the software, like yours did—which I think is just as important for someone who's never built their own PC. My only question is, how do I properly configure the settings in BIOS for my CPU and memory? **Bill G.**

Unless you're overclocking or having problems with your new rig, there's really no need to fiddle around with BIOS settings, which your motherboard configures automatically based on your hardware. In fact, you could be unscrewing the cap on a two-liter bottle of trouble if you change the settings without knowing what you're doing, and why. **PCG**

Black bears are best

Your article on *TERA* has an error: you list "panda bear" as a body type for the Popori race. While the better known giant panda is a member of the bear family, the lesser or red panda, pictured on the right, is not. And, just for the record, koalas aren't bears either. **Michael Engler**

O ye of little furry faith, there are plenty o' pandas in TERA, *including both the giant and red varieties. Koalas, however, didn't make the cut (they were probably too high off eucalyptus leaves to show up for the modeling sessions).* **PCG**

Let 'em soar

I would love to see the *Wing Commander* series remade to take advantage of a six-core processor, GTX 295s in SLI mode and 6GB of RAM! I bought a new PC for every game in that incredible series and there's plenty more do afterwards with *X-Wing vs. Tie Fighter*, *F-22*, *Comanche*, *and Jane's Combat* and *MechWarrior*. Please developers, revitalize the lost art of space and fighter combat games—they were some of the best PC games that ever existed! **Sam Stypczynski**

Simple demands

More Coconut Monkey.
Tanner Gallella

Done. **PCG**



THE HOT MAIL

We'll never stop givin'

What happened to the monthly contests? Even though I never won any of the prizes, I wonder why you've decided to drop the program.
Mark Russel


Let there be...FREE!

Although we no longer list all of our giveaways in Letters, we're as resolved as ever to mail you as much awesome loot as our mail pipes can handle. In fact, just last month we gave away a monster rig worth $3,000! But we think you have a good point; the Letters section could use some more free stuff flying around. So, starting this month, we're going to be sending a free game/gadget/whatever-we-steal-from-Evan's-desk to whoever sends in our favorite letter. And as our way of saying thanks for the reminder, we're picking you as this month's winner! Be sure to hook up with us on Facebook (bit.ly/pcgfacebook), Twitter (bit.ly/pcgtwitters), Steam (bit.ly/pcgsteamgroup), and our website (pcgamer.com) to get the latest scoop on all of our contests and giveaways! **PCG**

A great letter deserves a great prize, so we're sending Mark a copy of *Heroes of Newerth* in exchange for his stellar correspondence. Look up top to see how you can get in touch with *PC Gamer* and earn your chance to win next month's *PRIZE OF MYSTERY*!



PuG life

While I enjoyed the concept of your recent *WoW* PuG article (July 2010), there are so many players that "hurry hurry hurry" a group through these instances that I barely have time to buff or get buffed, let alone get food/water and coordinate strategy. *WoW* has a lot of jerks and I'm afraid your article might just be wishful thinking. **Steve L.**

I almost stood and cheered when I read the *WoW* PuG guide. It should be required reading for everyone who pushes the "Looking For Group" button. It's a good reminder to players to stay smart and observant—slowing down slightly to give lesser-geared players time to regain mana and take less damage only makes the instance take another five minutes. Top raid gear can make a so-so player cocky, but it won't make them good! **Heather Kaye**

The freedom to choose

Logan Decker came out big against Ubisoft's DRM scheme in his Soapbox column (June 2010), but mentions playing *Assassin's Creed 2* in the review of the A30 headphones, and then the game gets top billing in the *PC Gamer* Web Store in that same issue. Either *PC Gamer* supports buying the game or doesn't. Making reference to playing it and selling it in your store gives implicit approval of the game and appears to be a recommendation to buy it. I call on everyone to not buy any Ubisoft game that contains this DRM scheme. If this happens, Ubisoft will quickly abandon it. **Jonbad**

The reason we keep blabbing about Assassin's Creed 2 *is because it's an insanely fun game. What would be inconsistent is if* PC Gamer *pretended that it weren't as a result of its digital rights management (DRM). We don't like the policy of requiring a constant internet connection for single-player games in order to prevent piracy. We think it seriously devalues the game—we can't play on the airplane? We can't play if a meteor strikes our ISP?—and thus we recommended against purchasing* Assassin's Creed 2, *among other games, under these terms. We made our point, and will continue to do so in the future by clearly identifying which games are burdened with this requirement. After that, it's up to the reader—not* PC Gamer*—to decide whether or not this DRM is a deal-killer for them. We're not going to tell gamers who decide that they're fine with this DRM—which is, by the way, very prominently displayed on the front of the game box, to Ubisoft's credit—that they're wrong for making that choice. Because that's what PC gaming is all about—choice.* **Logan**

You can give too!

I want to start a PC gaming club at my school, but it needs to be able to fund-raise for charities. Awhile back you mentioned there are game-related charities, but I can't seem to find them. Can you help out a fellow PC gamer? **Leland Bernstein**

Poor Ezio will never walk again.

Back around the holidays (Issue 197), we did a quick roundup of our favorite charities that use games to help out people in need, including Child's Play (www.childsplaycharity.org), Donate Games (www.donategames.org), and Games that Give (www.gamesthatgive.net). But don't forget that a teacher or counselor at your school might also be able to help you locate charities in your own area that could use your help as well, whether it's raising funds to buy games for youth groups, or something not directly game-related at all, but still helpful to people in need. **PCG**

Undercover reporting

We're absolutely devastated that we failed to attribute our behind-the-scenes story of EVE Online*'s player council ("War and Peace", June 2010) to our international MMO reporter, Josh Augustine. Even worse, his mother is "very disappointed" in all of us.* **PCG**

PRTSCN



I think the dog is the least of their concerns right now.

Bears dual-wielding shotguns...god help us all. **Justin Wagner**

Not to mention the man-eating shark that's apparently capable of teleporting through walls to catch its prey—the stuff of our worst nightmares. There truly is no stopping this bestial rampage. **PCG**

SHOW US YOURS Writing really isn't your thing? Tell us your story with a great screenshot instead. Include PRTSCN in the subject line and a description of what's going on, and we might feature it in next month's issue.

BACK CHATTER

- Thanks for recommending *Beat Hazard*! I've found that my weirdest songs are the best ones to play. **Tom Tharp**

- I like this magazine for a different reason than most—it keeps my husband busy playing games, so I get time to quilt. We have dueling machines: his PC and my sewing machine. Keep up the good work. **June Coon**

- *WoW* 101: If the tank dies, it's the healer's fault; if the healer dies, it's the tank's fault; and if DPS dies, it's their own damn fault. **Brandon Shanks**

- Come on, Logan. Bill Murray didn't say, "Lighten up, Francis" in *Stripes*. It was Sgt. "Big Toe" Hulka. No points for you this round. **Ian O'Regan**

A lot of readers wrote in to correct Logan's grave error in quote attribution. He has subsequently been forbidden to use stripes in his upcoming squirrel clothing line. **PCG**

WHERE WE PLAY

Play on the official *PC Gamer* community servers

Team Fortress 2
66.151.138.34:27015

ArmA 2
75.102.38.3:2332

Counter-Strike Source
207.210.252.63

Ventrilo (voice chat)
208.100.40.19:3796

Our game servers are provided by Art of War Central, *PCG*'s staff-approved hosting service. Visit **artofwarcentral.com**

MONITOR

THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD



Global Superiority



"PC gaming's dead. It's a console-only future." Wrong. Not only is PC gaming pumping battery acid for blood through its steely veins, it's actually growing. For every development studio that wilts and dies, two more sprout up to take its place. The PC's roots are everywhere, from Croatia to New York, China to Wisconsin. So the next time someone utters those chilled words of gaming despair? Smile politely, fold open these pages, and brandish this map as indisputable visual evidence to the contrary. ■



Duct tape: is there anything it *can't* do?

Mashing machines

Dead Rising 2's kill-tacular weapon combos

The PC didn't get Capcom's zombie-fighting action game *Dead Rising*, where you could pick up just about anything wield it as a weapon—such as a lawn mower to trim the flesh off the undead, or a bowling ball, a bag of flour or even cooking oil—but *Dead Rising 2 is* landing on the PC, and it's even more killerrific than the original. This time you're allowed to use weapon combos as former National Motocross champion Chuck Greene fights off the undead. His improvised weapons are deadly enough in isolation, but together they're doubly bloody. We asked Capcom for their favorite zombie-chopping combos. ■

Craig Pearson

ZOMBO COMBO LISTO

Knives and boxing gloves
Chuck pounds and slices the dead simultaneously.

Chainsaws and boat paddle
Think lumberjack meets Darth Maul.

RC helicopter and machetes
The knives are strapped to the whirling blades.

Rake and car battery
The pointy gardening implement becomes a giant, pokey stun gun.

Drill and bucket
Zombies can't kill what they can't see, but you can drill through a bucket.

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SAVE YOUR GAME SAVES

TOOL GAME SAVE MANAGER COULD SAVE YOUR BACON

Every gamer knows the pain of losing a saved game that represented hours of progress, wiped out in the blink of an eye after a careless format or hard drive failure. But you don't have to be a victim. Game Save Manager scans your PC for games and gives you the option of backing up the associated saved games all at once. If your game's not on the continually updated database, you can add it. We'd love to see this feature baked into Windows, but for now you'll have to download it from *gsm.duncsweb*.

SILVER SCREEN SHEPARD

CULTURE *MASS EFFECT* MOVIE

Commander Shepard will soon be saving the galaxy on the big screen. Sci-fi RPG *Mass Effect*'s movie rights have been picked up by Legendary Pictures, the company that produced *The Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*. BioWare's Drs. Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk are both executive producing, and a treatment is being written by *I Am Legend* scriptwriter, Mark Protosevich. No word yet on "he" or "she."



NOW PLAYING

AT THE PC GAMER WEB STORE

We hate shelves. This distaste for storage space led us to build (virtually, of course) an online store of our own—an outlet for the finest PC games available. If you're ready to make a stand against the tyranny of $80 Swedish plywood cabinets, visit ***www.pcgamer.com/store*** for your share of our cherished, weightless games.

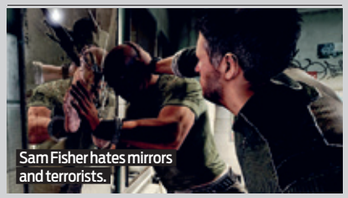
Splinter Cell Conviction

Age of Conan: Rise of the Godslayer

GTA IV: Episodes from Liberty City

Transformers: War for Cybertron

The Sims 3: Ambitions


Sam Fisher hates mirrors and terrorists.



Ain't that a beautiful site?

Here it is: the new PC Gamer website!

A new global home for PC gaming

PC Gamer's presence on the web has taken various forms over the years, but until recently it's always been a rather pitiful footnote to the magazine. But no more: The new PCGamer.com—a collaboration between the US and UK editions of *PC Gamer*— features news about PC gaming around the clock, as well as full reviews, nerdily detailed previews, in-depth interviews, podcasts, videos, trailers, as well as links to our game servers and to the editorial staff.

Of course, the site also features community forums that you'll share with other super-intelligent *PC Gamer* readers. So bookmark the site and take a second to sign up. Then you can comment on the articles, post your views, and let us know what we can do to make PCGamer.com work even better for you! ■

Craig Pearson

FREE COMPANY

FREE *COMPANY OF HEROES* GOES ONLINE, FOR FREE

One of the best RTS games you can buy will soon become one of the best online RTSes you *can't* buy. THQ has announced that a spin-off of the fantastic World War II RTS, *Company of Heroes*, will soon be downloadable for free.

Company of Heroes Online will look and play very similarly to the *CoH* that won our hearts and minds in 2006 (which, by the way, still looks amazing) but with a few alterations to turn it into an online game. In *CoH*, as you earned experience points in combat you'd unlock abilities like supply drops or heavy tanks; in *CoHO* those abilities will be persistent from match to match, much like unlocks in *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*. **DS**

AMD FUSES CPU, GPU

TECH ALL YOUR GRAPHICS AND COMPUTING ON ONE CHIP

AMD has announced Fusion, the first in a new series of chips that performs the task of your processor and graphics card on one magic little square of silicon. Technical specs are being kept secret, but the chip's current target is the netbook market, so the low-powered laptops should see a big boost in gaming capabilities when AMD releases it at the end of 2010. **CP**



TRENDS

For the love of the games

Not every company can keep looking after old games. Valve and Blizzard are big and crazy enough to still support games from a decade ago, but when a company can't, it's left to the fans to carry on supporting games into their old age. Here are some great stories of fans doing the developer's job.

Tribes 2

1 After a seven-year run, Vivendi shut down the multiplayer severs for the much-beloved jetpack-powered shooter *Tribes 2* in 2008. Only a few months later, fans set to work creating *TribesNEXT*. Still in beta, the fan-run service allows players to download a version of *Tribes 2* along with a patch that grants access to the *TribesNEXT* servers. It's yours for the taking at *bit.ly/crc4Qc*.

Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines

2 The Source Engine-based RPG came out in 2004, just before developer Troika closed. It's regularly patched by fans, whose current patches are up to 6.9: *bit.ly/djVQkA*. But there's an even more ambitious fan plan: to update the game to the most recent version of the Source Engine: *wiki.thedaedalus.net*.



Freelancer

3 Digital Anvil closed in 2005 , two years after releasing their space-combat and trading game *Freelancer*. It was well patched, although fans have released a patch version 1.4 to fix some minor bugs. They've also been releasing their own mod tools, the most recent being the *Freelancer Total Conversion Mod Starter Pack*, a set of tools to help anyone with an idea for a mod to alter the variables of the game: *bit.ly/busUoY*.

THE SPY



The Spy is watching you right now. Stop doing that.

"The Spy's got friends in every town and village from here to the Sudan, he speaks a dozen languages, he'll blend in, disappear, you'll never see him again."

At least, that's what The Spy told *Crysis* developers Crytek after they discovered his rubber-plant periscope. The two-way communication device allowed The Spy to speak while sneakily applying a new moustache and fake laughter lines, reinventing himself as suave ex-actor Cliffington Harvard from the Hafferford-Barley acting troupe, and stumbling into their offices pretending to be lost and "frightfully rich." While Crytek attempted to sell its engine to Cliffington as the perfect acting troupe training software, The Spy grabbed some interesting information from Germany's most *maximum* of game developers.

Crytek's making an FPS MMO. The Spy heard rumors of this at the start of the year, when two Crytek employees outed the existence of it in their LinkedIn profiles. Yegor Bondar, Crytek designer, listed himself as working on a "not announced online MMO FPS," and, more recently, James Dennett, senior IT manager at Crytek, listed his work on "designing, testing and implementing, as part of the development team, the systems infrastructure for an MMO online game." As The Spy previously revealed, Crytek has registered *Kingdoms*, and has toyed with castles and dragons in its CryEngine 3 demonstration videos. Both of these strongly whiff of an MMO setting, but Yegor's listing does mention the MMO is an FPS. It might end up a combination of the two, like a large scale *Dark Messiah*.

While The Spy was sneaking out, he noted some scrawlings on a whiteboard indicating that Crytek's grabbed the *Time Splitters: Future Perfect* name, the game that made UK developer Free Radical famous before Crytek rescued it from bankruptcy. It's already been released on console, so what could the devs be thinking?

Man of mystery

The Spy's disguise held, so he took Cliffington to EA's headquarters for further info on Crytek's doings. While charming the receptionist with a rare flower from the Danube, The Spy snuck past her and into the Electronic Arts mainframe facility. After his personal radar failed, The Spy accidentally wandered into a dev team's workspace and was escorted out. The Spy asked his helpful developer what she was working on, and his avuncular attitude garnered this: "Oh, it's a medieval sims game, but I'm sure a senile old man like you won't understand what that means. Now come along, the toilet is this way." Check and mate.

> "A game with 'Z' in the title. It has to be about zombies."

After The Spy left the toilet, he re-stumbled into the *Mass Effect* room at the end of the building. Two developers were running around with foam guns, shouting "pew, pew, pew!" and dodging between tables. One stopped and told the other: "We need to do this for *Mass Effect*." And that's how games are made. *Mass Effect* will be getting multiplayer, probably in the third game, although there's also talk of DLC linking games two and three. Sadly, The Spy was exposed when he told the two gents he was "one of your fathers…the ugly one."

Geared up

Pleased with his disguise, The Spy thought he'd try again. It's been a while since *Borderlands* was out, what could those "cool dudes" at Gearbox be up to? The Spy took Clifford to Texas, but by now he'd looked like Clifford for so long he'd forgotten who he was. So when he heard about Gearbox registering the name *Z-Day*, it took a moment to slip in. Games! Ha! So Gearbox's making a game with "Z" in the title. It has to be about zombies. And the "D-Day" connotations are all too obvious.

The Texas heat had its way with Clifford's face, melting the glue that held his eyebrows on.The Spy fled the scene, but was hounded into an alley. He thought it was the end, the mob closing in, when an iron grip grasped his collar and yanked him into the air.

"Who are you?"

"You don't know me, but I'm in *City of Heroes 2*."

Spy out. ■



Massive Attack



Rings for Everyone

It's not a jewelry sale—*LOTRO* is going free-to-play! ***by Josh Augustine***

Every inch of the game world can be explored at no cost and Turbine has promised to never charge for the primary storyline.

"The number one reason people play MMOs is because their friends play, and the number one reason why they don't play is that they don't want to pay a subscription." When Kate Paiz, *LotRO*'s executive producer, explains her studio's reasoning behind adopting a free-to-play model for its premier MMO, it makes a lot of sense: since Turbine took *Dungeons & Dragons Online* free to play in 2009, two million new players have joined and revenue for the game has increased five-fold. It's hard to imagine the potential for growth with *LotRO*, a higher-quality MMO that's linked to one of this decade's hottest fantasy franchises.

As I ran through the Shire with Kate, she gave me the full scoop on the new business model, "It's not identical to the *DDO* free-to-play system; we've learned a lot about what players want or don't want to spend money on." For example, Turbine has found that players resent having to pay to increase their character's level cap, so max level will be available to everyone at no cost.

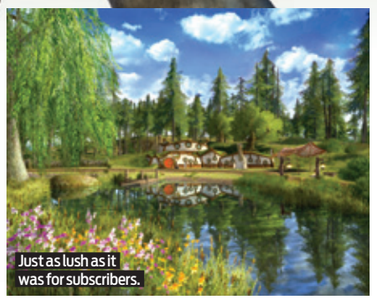
A good life on the cheap

Turbine wants everyone that steps into Middle-earth to revel in their faithful recreation of Tolkien's brainchild, so every inch of the game world (outside of instances) can be explored at no cost and they've promised to never charge for the Epic Story, the primary story arc that follows the events of the books and lets the player interact with and aid all the famous characters in the lore—reason alone for any *LotR* fan to dive in.

"People like freedom," Paiz says. It's an obvious remark, but for *LotRO*, it means: free access to housing, cosmetics, music, crafting, and most every major system. One noticeable feature missing from the list is Monster Play, *LotRO*'s version of PvP that faces players against other player-controlled baddies, which will now be for subscribers only.



Brained by a spiked mace? No charge!



Just as lush as it was for subscribers.



"Spare some Turbine Points so I can buy a buff?"

The toll zones

After the three free zones—Ered Luin, Shire and Bree-land, which offer 800 quests and enough content to hit level 22—quest and instance content is gonna cost you.

When entering a new zone, you receive a notice reminding you that, for a few bucks, you can unlock all of that zone's content. Undecided players can browse all of the zone's quests and rewards before purchasing. It's a slick system that does a good job of teasing players while exposing the innards of every content pack to let players make informed decisions—a combination that puts the pressure on the developers to create top notch content that players will value.

Alternatively, players can become "VIPs" by paying the old monthly subscription rate ($14.99/month or $9.99/month if you purchase six months) and have unlimited access to just about everything in the game, along with 500 Turbine Points each month.

In tandem with the free-to-play changes, Turbine is also releasing a new expansion in the online cash shop. The yet-unnamed content lets players see many of the historical events mentioned in the novels first-hand through a story-telling mechanic (The Grey Company you travel with tell you their people's past) that has you take on the role of "the red shirts" of Middle-earth history. The new zone, Windfells, is vibrant, bringing players back to greener pastures after the murky *Siege of Mirkwood* expansion. Revolving around areas and conflicts that were never fully fleshed out in the lore, such as Gondor's ruins and the Wildmen and beasts that inhabit them, has allowed the developers to explore more mythological content, a welcome change sure to freshen up the pace of enemies. ■

WHAT DO I GET?

Quick reference guide to what a free *LotRO* means for *you*

If you have an existing account, you'll always have access to all the characters, quests and content that you would've had access to as an active subscriber under the old system (taking into account any expansions you've purchased) without paying a dime, *except* Monster Play PvP. Some features like inventory space may be limited if you drop your subscription.

New players can quest in the three starting zones and participate in the main storyline with no limits on character level or exploration beyond. Expanded versions of game features and quest/instance content can be purchased individually.

Anyone can instantly unlock the vast majority of the game's content and features by paying a monthly subscription fee or by purchasing them individually.

HOW IT WORKS

The many currencies explained

GOLD The existing currency system remains intact, and is used for all the same maintenance and in-character purchases, as it has been for years. ***Changes:*** Non-subscribers will need to pay to remove a five-gold cap limit on their coffers.

TURBINE POINTS The cash shop currency; purchased (like all cash shop currencies) in bundles for real money, then used to purchase items, buffs, etc. from the microtransactions store through the game's UI. These will also be occasionally rewarded from quests in-game.

DESTINY POINTS This existing currency is still earned through Monster Play (*LotRO*'s version of PvP) and used to purchase PvP upgrades. ***Changes:*** It can be accumulated without subscribing, but only subscribers will be able to spend it.



Hot Tub Carnival Machine

DDO's biggest update of the year brings rubber-nosed enemies, guild perks

Carnivals are unsettling—clowns, sideshow monstrosities and tricycle-riding animals never sit right with me—but they're even worse when demonic Tieflings are running the show. I braved my carny fears to test *Dungeons & Dragons Online*'s latest adventure pack, *Carnival of Shadows*, and put a stop to the nomadic freak show that'd set up shop outside a noble's estate.

One thing I appreciate about the adventure pack (free to *DDO* subscribers and available in the cash shop for everyone else), is that not all the quests revolve around killing X number of Y. Our first task was to sneak into a party the noble was throwing inside his mansion. We made our way through a secret underground entrance to the estate, overcoming a series of illusions that blocked the way to the noble's hall. Once we were through, we did a little "light editing" to the guest list, adding our names.

The rest of the pack is flush with side quests, ranging from puzzles to fist fights, building to an encounter against the succubus ringmaster—the pinnacle of the adventure pack. The content is intended for players between levels 5 and 8, although max-level characters can play it at an increased difficulty level.



Sneak peek at the next adventure pack!

Prepare to get moist. *Violent Fens* (due out in early August) will call players beneath the waves for the game's first underwater combat and introduce a new swampy wilderness zone for level 9 characters, filled with all sorts of soggy, muddy bad guys in need of whomping.

I'm on a boat

We all want to hang out with our guildmates, but sometimes you just don't feel like slaying dragons or risking valuable appendages as your social time. Sometimes you just want to kick it in a Jacuzzi and sip Mai Tais in a totally masculine, friends-only way with your homies. Now you can. Update 5 (which adds the *Carnival of Shadows* adventure pack) also introduces a guild-leveling system with a host of rewards for guilds to unlock, such as an airship for guildmates to relax on between adventures.

On-board amenities for airships will unlock as guilds level. Our vessel was decked-out with target dummies, barkeeps, navigators to drop us off at points-of-interest around the world and even a hot tub. Earning the most luxurious ships won't be easy, but any guild should be able to earn the smallest-size ship with casual effort. **JA**


When dogs start walking on giant fireballs, it's time to leave.


The faeries are only an illusion, but their peskiness sure isn't!


Kill the box monster to get at his loot-filled chest.

Reinforcements Have Arrived

Season One updates bring new features and content to **STAR TREK ONLINE** fans

We blasted *Star Trek Online* with our criticism rays back in February when it released. But MMOs are anything but static, capable of evolving with every patch, and Cryptic's been working its tail off to patch up the black holes in its final frontier. The updates to Season One have brought a lot of great new features to the game, including a difficulty slider that introduces meaningful death penalties at higher settings (along with appropriate boons for that risk); a stat-tracking achievement system that rewards exploration and combat with titles, bragging rights and resistance bonuses; and—one of our favorite MMO features—a system that allows you to temporarily scale to the level of your groupmates so that you're never held back from playing with your friends just because your characters are different levels. *Star Trek Online* could still use more endgame content, but these enhancements form a stronger and more flexible foundation for fun in the Federation than existed earlier this year. **JA**


There's only one way to find out if there's an achievement for hitting every asteroid.


It isn't easy to capture a port, but it's definitely worth it.

Political Pirates

Players become captains of industry in **PIRATES OF THE BURNING SEA**



Since launch, players have been fighting for bragging rights to *Pirates of the Burning Sea*'s 70 ports scattered throughout the Caribbean, but, thanks to the *Power & Prestige* expansion, victors can now take real control. After their nation captures a port, players elect a Governor to oversee its development, who uses tax rates to raise funds for its infrastructure and defense. These investments affect the appearance of the city—boosting infrastructure will turn beggars into businessmen, who operate shops at every corner. Other rights of the political elite include a special title, access to unique clothes, and the ability to dip into government coffers for a personal salary. Industrialists and PvPers can still chip in by completing daily quests that boost their favorite port's coffers. The usual additions—new missions, new factions and tweaks to naval and ground combat—as well as drastic improvements to the game's character lighting system are also also included. **JA**



Two wrongs just might make a right in **CITY OF HEROES**' upcoming expansion ***by Josh Augustine***

Nothing is ever set in stone. "It's always been a comic book staple," Matt Miller, City of Heroes' senior design lead told me, "the hero runs into an issue with something and falls from grace or a villain sees the light of day and redeems himself." Hawkeye, Juggernaut, and The Thunderbolts are some of the examples of comic book defectors and double agents that Matt says inspired *Going Rogue*.

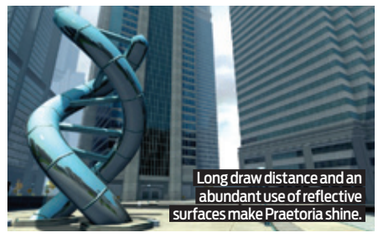
But the world's covered in shades of gray, which is why the new alignment system adds Vigilante and Rogue to the current options of Hero or Villain. A Vigilante is someone like The Punisher or Batman, who believes that the ends justify the means, while a Rogue is just a selfish jerk.

Making the switch

Players looking for an out can take on quests with forced moral choices that lead them away from their current alignment. For example, in the quest I played to complete my transition from Villain to Rogue, I refused to lay waste to innocent civilians, causing my team to turn on me. I'm forced to turn against my former villain pals to stay alive, and then team up with a nearby hero to bash in my boss's face. And to prove I'm not a cookie-doling Girl Scout now, I bash in the hero's face when he tries to arrest me afterwards. It's a fun, story-driven way of explaining my character's fresh new outlook on life.

As a Rogue, I had access to new middle-ground moral areas and could choose to complete the transition to Hero and gain full access to every city and amenity that a Hero would. I could also opt to fall back into cruel villainy, or simply stay put.


It takes a fiery whip to keep all your summoned demons in line.


Long draw distance and an abundant use of reflective surfaces make Praetoria shine.


In a world riddled with superpowers, dual-wielding pistols still rocks.

New playgrounds

Praetoria—an alternate-reality dystopia where the superheroes are vigilante guerrilla fighters and villains uphold the dictator—is *Going Rogue*'s gorgeous new starting area. It also includes end-game content that takes full advantage of an updated graphics engine. Lighting, reflections, and water in particular show tremendous improvement. Two new power sets—Dual Pistols and Demon Summoning—also show off some awesome animations and visual effects. ■

Shades of gray

The hosts of the prominent *CoH* podcast, Off the Cape, explain why their characters are changing allegiances.



NUCLEAR PHANTOM
Hero going Vigilante

Story: A plot to kill him with radiation left Nuclear Phantom able to drift into a shadowy dimension and recruit phantoms to his aid.

Reasons for changing: "Too long have we been anchored by the rule of law. Too long has the oppression of the self-righteous crushed the spirit of true justice. I see, with eyes unbound to this stagnant world, the hollow souls of those who callously commit evil, and I need but reach beyond the veil of this dimension to stop them. I will no longer, for the sake of honor or society, resist my soul's cries for vengeance! Besides, it's not like anyone can stop me..."

Quote: "Evil can seek the light, or be dragged to it screaming in agony."

MEKKASASHI
Villain going Rogue

Story: Daughter of an over-protective mad scientist, Mekkasashi is a malicious, energy-manipulating femme-fatale backed by an army of robots.

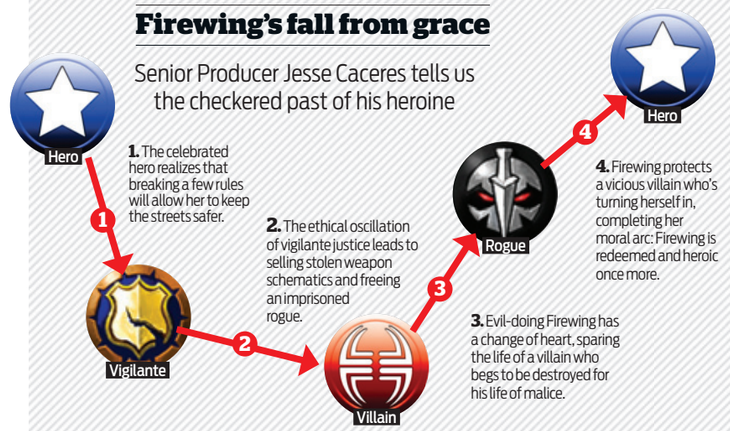
Reasons for changing: "It has the reputation of being the strongest and most secure city in the world, but Grandville is a pretty sorry sight from the ground. You're either with Arachnos, or you're in the gutter. I want to see the sun without factory smoke in the way! I want to see the sights and meet people who would've tried to arrest my former villainous self!

Quote: "Just because I don't want to kick puppies and steal candy from kids anymore doesn't mean I don't remember who's number one."

Listen to the Off the Cape podcast at offthecape.com.

Firewing's fall from grace

Senior Producer Jesse Caceres tells us the checkered past of his heroine



MOUNTS FOR MONEY

TRENDS PROWLERS FOR PENNIES



2,500 pennies to be exact. Developers everywhere no doubt looked on enviously as *WoW*'s Celestial Steed mount raked in millions of dollars in its first day. *EverQuest II* quickly followed with its own similarly-priced mounts—Stonebrunt Prowlers. They look great, and at least *EQ II*'s mounts give buffs and can be ridden in combat.

WELL, THAT WAS A SURPRISE

EVE TIER-4 PRODUCTS SHOW UP AHEAD OF SCHEDULE

It wouldn't be a brand new *EVE* feature if the players didn't find some way to break it and use it to their advantage within hours of its release. But this time was different—the feature hadn't been released yet. Mere hours after the *Tyrannis* expansion launched, players uncovered a loophole that let them produce tier-4 starbase structures at insanely cheap costs. CCP uncharacteristically swiftly warned that anyone taking advantage of the bug would be dealt with "appropriately...to ensure there will be a viable market."

STILL NO PODRACING...YET

STAR WARS VEHICLES SNEAKING INTO THE OLD REPUBLIC

We've seen vehicles lurking in the background of *TOR* screenshots for awhile now, but it wasn't until BioWare released the Sith Warrior class trailer that we got the first real hint that players would be able to drive vehicles in their upcoming *Star Wars: The Old Republic.* The trailer shows the player riding a traditional speeder bike through a canyon. Here's hoping that tauntauns, sandcrawlers and tanks aren't far behind.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

GUILD WARS 2 DYNAMIC EVENTS RULE

When an NPC army marches towards a friendly town in *GW2*, players can either run out and ambush the warband en route or let them advance and set up camp nearby. If left alone, they'll send snipers and scouts into the nearby hills to assassinate the town's NPCs. Players will need to intervene if they don't want the town to be completely overrun, and if it is, they'll need to lead an army to retake it before they have access to it again. This flowchart-like progression of significant changes to the world could be the sweet spot between player empowerment and a congruous game world.

DEV MAN TALKING



Andy Schatz is creating *Monaco*, the winner of the Independent Game Festival's grand prize in 2010. Andy likes Ultimate Frisbee, *X-COM*, *Ultima IV*, and the board game *Diplomacy*. Andy originally pitched his prototype to Microsoft years ago, but the company turned it down.

Are games art?

Yes.

There it is. Case closed.

Of course, the typical answer to this question is not so absolute. The caveat you most commonly hear is that while games *are* art, we haven't even scratched the surface of the medium: we haven't discovered gaming's Michaelangelo or experienced our *Citizen Kane* moment.

But we're close. So close I can taste it. So what will *The First Great Game* be like?

The First Great Game will be on the PC.

It will be on the PC because it won't be obvious to the risk-averse console publishers whether people will be willing to buy a short, weird game about love or friendship or nature or betrayal. Despite intuitive controls, *The First Great Game* will require more depth of interaction than Left, Right, Up, Down, A, B, X and Y. And its creators will be more interested in having access to a wide audience than in having access to deep pocketbooks.

On identity

The First Great Game won't ask us to pretend to be someone else.

It's just asking too much of gamers to pretend to be Nico Bellic, let alone Don Corleone. Your typical first-person game casts the player as Kafka's cockroach, unused to his body and having to learn how to interact with a world that exists entirely in the uncanny valley. No one will ever improve upon *Fallout 3*'s take on the subject: the player starts as a baby in a tutorial that both teaches basic controls and determines character traits through a foreshortened youth. Games are doomed to repeat this trope so long as we expect the player to inhabit the psyche of that deranged monster, the player character.

Instead, *The First Great Game* will be about a theme, an idea or a world. A world in which the player does not exist.

Portal approaches this, as the player character is invisible and a robot on an intercom takes center stage. Indie games like *Today I Die* and *World of Goo* take the concept, removing the player character entirely in order to tell cohesive stories about someone, somewhere or something else. *SimCity* and *The Sims* may be the best examples we've seen so far of games that make us care about a world in which we, as the player, do not ostensibly exist.

Short stories

Finally, *The First Great Game* will be short and dense, like the novella *Invisible Cities*. Sure, you might only get three hours of "gameplay" out of Italo Calvino's metaphorical travelog, but it's far preferable to dawdle and meander through it. Every page is a portal to another world, each paragraph is a poem. In great art, there is no "grind."

Not every game aspires to be great art, of course—my current project, *Monaco*, is a popcorn flick, bubblegum pop sort of co-op stealth game. But when *The First Great Game* finally arrives, it will shine a light for the rest of us; it will show a way forward that seems immediately obvious but which we somehow hadn't seen before.

The First Great Game won't be a platformer or a traditional RPG or a stealth game or a shooter. It won't be a descendent of *StarCraft* or *Street Fighter*, because it won't be a game which asks us to improve upon a skill set that has no bearing upon the real world. *The First Great Game* will offer epiphany moments by the bucketload, and "Aha!" moments that pertain at once not only to the game mechanics, but also to the narrative and the real world. And when it has run out of "Aha!" moments, it will end. ■

> "***The First Great Game* won't ask us to pretend to be someone else.**"



Sorry, you aren't really Gordon Freeman.

IN SIMULATION



Andy Mahood practiced for his first few *Silent Hunter 5* patrols by taking long baths and listening to *Yellow Submarine*. He's remarkably clean now.

When Ubisoft released *Silent Hunter 5: Battle of the Atlantic* this past March, the sim community and gaming press were surprisingly united in their discontent. The WWII U-boat simulation was such a clumsy, buggy and deficient follow-up to Ubisoft Romania's initial two chapters that even diehard PC submariners couldn't be bothered to scuttle their heavily modded *Silent Hunter 3* and *4* installs for the pulchritudinous new release.

Digital rights mockery

It didn't help matters that Ubisoft saddled *SH5* with a horrible new DRM copy protection scheme that mandates a permanent internet connection for the game to even function (even in single-player mode). Calls to repeal this draconian anti-piracy measure have fallen on deaf ears—it appears that, like the defendant who insists on representing him/herself in court, Ubisoft still has a fool for a client.

I echoed many of these complaints in my June issue *PCG* review but my eternal optimism convinced me that, between Ubisoft's in-progress patches and some timely third-party mods, *Silent Hunter 5* was destined to reach flank speed in short order.

Flash forward a couple of months and we have now some solid, game-changing files to install, investigate, and evaluate. Ubi's latest patch gets first crack followed by some of my favorite third-party mods (there are many out there but these are the ones I've opted to stick with until some better options come along). The end result is a concoction of flawed goodness, unresolved gameplay issues, and (sometimes) compelling naval theater.

Official Ubisoft *Silent Hunter 5* patch (version 1.2)

(Automatic download on game start-up)

It hit the internet on May 11th with its feet barely moving—it executed a mild face plant as a result. It wasn't so much the things the patch didn't fix—impotent enemy AI, ill-conceived user interface, brain-dead friendly ships, deaf and dumb deck gun crews—as the overall lack of effort. The game shipped in a decidedly broken state and a few token fixes aren't likely to convert old fans or attract new ones. Sure, it's nice to have a functional "depth under keel" button as well as the critical "return to course" command back, but the overall bug fix changelog is a day late and a dollar short.

Multiple UIs for SH5 with TDC mod (by TheDarkWraith)

bit.ly/ajm0bl

One of my biggest complaints about the release version of *SH5* was an arcade-style user interface that completely eliminated the elegant clickable control of *Silent Hunter 3* and *4*. Thanks to the modding efforts of TheDarkWraith, however, *Silent Hunter 5* fans can now choose from a variety of UI screens—including classic *SH3* and *SH4* styles (complete with throttle, heading, and depth gauges), or an all-new enhanced *SH5* design. The latter features a switchable header-rudder bar; fuel, CO2, O2, and battery level bargraph; and a much-needed officer shortcut bar that lets you send direct commands to key stations. The mod also includes multiple TDC (Torpedo Data Computer) enhancements to give you improved control of your weapon stores.

> **"We now have some solid, game-changing files to install."**

Environment 1.2 Mod (by W_Clear)

bit.ly/908Mnf

Although the original game was quite the looker, W_Clear's *Environment* mod still manages to improve on an already brilliant palette. Realistic fog, sharper waves, convincing sea foam, and improved lighting effects all contribute to a more immersive visual experience. By the time you read this, version 2.0 will be out and I anticipate it'll be dropping jaws even further.



Silent Hunter 5 is proof that modders can save a sinking game.

JoneSoft *Generic Mod Enabler*

bit.ly/SHmod3

An easy-to-use utility that's been around for some time, *GME* lets you enable—or disable—specific mods for *SH5* with just a single click. If you don't already have it (and it works with a number of other games) then get it. *Now.* ■

ALTERNATE LIVES



Desslock still boots up *Temple of Elemental Evil* to get his turn-based fix, although lately he's been exploring the scary, fast-paced modern worlds of *Alpha Protocol* and *Mass Effect*.

If you consider using honed *mouse fu* and manual dexterity to thwart the pursuit of a gaggle of orcs nipping at your heels to be a roleplaying zenith, you're a genre boor. Real-time RPGs inherently compromise roleplaying depth because success in them is at least partly dependent upon player skill, instead of the skill of the character you're supposed to be roleplaying. In a real-time RPG, your character could be a clubfooted, arthritic gnome dubbed Sir Klutz, but if you're blessed with divine hand-eye coordination, your puny alter-ego could chop an ogre to pieces.

In a turn-based game, a character's abilities are determined solely by that character's attributes, regardless of the player's talents. But that enhanced roleplaying fidelity apparently means squat to most gamers, or at least isn't worth trading off the immersion and faster pace of a real-time game. Largely because they sell poorly compared to the real-time competition, the last turn-based RPG from a major North American developer was 2003's *Temple of Elemental Evil*.

Lazy analysis

The conclusion that turn-based RPGs are commercially disadvantaged was a premature extrapolation based upon the performance of a handful of games, but it's unlikely to be reconsidered soon. If anything, RPGs are trending in the opposite direction, as evidenced by the shooter-type combat of recent games like *Mass Effect* and *Alpha Protocol*. Turn-based Japanese console-RPGs with prolific sales are dismissed as an irrelevant, regional anomaly.

So what's a turn-based fan to do, aside from surfing to GOG.com to grab an old classic like *Betrayal at Krondor*? Last year's *Drakensang* offers a hybrid of turn-based and real-time combat by having turns that play continuously. You can also pause *Dragon Age* after each character's actions to emulate turn-based combat. But if quasi-semi-hybrid-mutant turn-based mode won't do, and you absolutely, positively, have to kill every lizard in the room with a turn-based fireball, then look to indie developer Jeff Vogel. Vogel's Spiderweb Software has been creating nothing but turn-based RPGs for more than 15 years.

Enter the Spiderweb

I reviewed Jeff's most recent game, *Avernum 6*, on page 78. Although it's the sixth (and likely final) game in the series, it's a fine place to start, as there's no need to play them in order. The first three games were essentially enhanced remakes of the even older *Exile* games, and even those remakes are now so dated that Vogel is going to remake them *again*. The new remakes will use the *Avernum 6* engine and be rewritten from the ground up to include new quests, characters and other content.

Vogel has also announced an entirely new series, *Avadon*. He's spent a great deal of time developing *Avadon's* human-dominated world of Lynaeus. As is usual for Vogel, it's a swords-and-sorcery setting without any elves, dwarves or hobbits, but there will be a handful of isolated monstrous races (titans, ogres and rat-like wretches). *Avadon's* most ambitious feature is its political system, which Vogel promises is populated by numerous factions and influence peddlers who'll draw players into plenty of intrigue and spying. Political machinations are always welcome as far as I'm concerned, since they add replayability and depth to a setting. Yet the politics in most RPGs are limited to parlaying with, or anointing, a dopey king. In *Avadon: The Black Fortress*, your character is primarily a political spy.

Perhaps most importantly, it'll launch in early 2011 and yet still feature turn-based combat, making it a welcome genre aberration. Lament no longer, brethren. ■

> **"What's a turn-based fan to do, aside from surfing GOG.com?"**



Okay, so *Avadon's* graphics still won't knock *Crysis 2* off the chart, but you may get to meet a Burgomeister.

FACE OFF

Fanboy debate: What's Valve's greatest game?

Team Fortress 2: The best-supported shooter of all time is a staple of PC gaming.



Half-Life 2: A masterwork of entertainment backed by an indomitable volume of acclaim.





Since 2007, *PC Gamer* Senior Editor **Evan Lahti** has logged more than 500 hours in *Team Fortress 2*, including 194 as his favorite class, the Soldier.



Robert Hathorne, an intern at *PC Gamer*, can only fall asleep when accompanied by dulcet Vortigaunt tones and a pheromone air freshener.

EL: *Team Fortress 2* was third on our top 100 games of all time list. *Half-Life 2* was second. The way I see it, *TF2* lets me play as a bomb-loving, drunken Scottish cyclops; in *HL2*, I'm a mute physics professor. Your turn.

RH: Exactly, in *HL2* you're a steadfast physics professor (backed by an all-star cast) standing up to alien overlords. *TF2* is just a bunch of respawning minions that have depressingly few in-game connections to other characters.

EL: Are you serious? *TF2*'s characters are piles of personality, reinforced by their goofy accents and unique mechanics. Bottom-line, though: no other Valve game has received the post-launch support that *TF2* has. If we're talking purely in terms of the raw assets, effort and content added to make sure it stays relevant, *TF2* is the bigger, better game.

In 120 patches, Valve has introduced new game modes, rewritten the core mechanics of its character classes, published world-class maps like cp_gorge, created Pixar-quality animated vignettes, integrated a crafting system and held holiday events and propaganda art contests. It represents the pinnacle of what PC development should be: games as platforms that change with their consumers.

RH: *HL2* isn't a platform like *TF2* is because it doesn't *need* to be. As a single-player experience, *HL2* doesn't require the same maintenance *TF2* does. However, if your argument is lack of support for *HL2*, we need look no further than *Episodes 1* and *2*. As expansions to an already robust game, they serve as both mechanical and visual upgrades that, in terms of file size, far exceed what *TF2* has to offer.

What about ***Portal***? It's a gem, but our consensus is that more of it is spent teaching you techniques than letting you act creatively.

EL: ...And it's been three years and counting since *Episode 2*. I don't think we can judge how great a game is solely on the experience held on the disc and exclude Valve's mishandling of *HL2* after launch: it simply doesn't know what to do with the game. *EP2* ended on a wonderful cliffhanger, but after years of total silence, it's lost most of its relevance or weight as a story. I'd love to hear you make a case for the gameplay not feeling dated—shooters have changed so much since 2007.

RH: As a matter of fact, I'd love to talk about gameplay. What Valve does so well in *HL2* is allow gameplay to tell a story without intrusive cutscenes. When you enter City 17 by train for the first time, you're a part of the city; hopeless refugees react to your presence and old friends like Barney come to life with endearing stories and quips. Every shot fired is a part of the story—that struggle through Ravenholm, or your stand with Alyx at the White Forest Inn are some of the most well-paced and memorable combat experiences ever designed. Rocketing the army of Striders off their twiggy, tripod legs in *EP2*'s final battle is the most exhilarating and challenging boss fight I've ever played in an FPS.

EL: I do admire the pacing and tech; *HL2* got so much mileage from its physics—ragdoll effects and the gravity gun. But *TF2*'s sound is so underappreciated for how much information it distributes. I think it's one of the most successful systems we've ever seen in the genre: a pipe bomb *dink* or Scout's taunt immediately conveys danger. And I love the respect for player psychology Valve brings to *TF2*: every class has its own set of unique silhouettes and behaviors. This sounds sensational, but it's such an accomplishment to create a *culture* of multiplayer gaming; one that's wrapped in humor and sustained by Valve's constant effort.

RH: It's easy to be captivated by something that's constantly changing. *HL2* stands as a monolith of what PC gaming can be, and it didn't need 120 updates to get there. In essentially the same state it was in at launch, *HL2* represents brilliance in considered design, memorable moments of intense emotion, original storytelling and character subtlety that any gamer can recognize as one-of-a-kind within the medium. ■

ASSASSIN'S CREED BROTHERHOOD

Ezio's crime? A horse parking ticket.

FIRST LOOK When in Rome, kill as the Romans kill

The ending of *Assassin's Creed 2* left almost as many unanswered questions as the *Lost* finale, but the story of Ezio and Desmond won't conclude with a "*Que?*" Ubisoft assures us that the answers are coming in a full sequel, *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, which moves the story to the Eternal City and introduces a thrilling and inventive multiplayer component to the game.

Of course, the single-player story retains its prominence, and picks up where *Assassin's Creed 2* ended. In fact, according to Creative Director Patrice Desilets, the start of *Brotherhood* will retell that conclusion. "*AC2* finished underneath the Vatican in a strange vault, talking to the goddess Nirvana, and you're thinking 'What the hell?' So this is where we start." From there, Ezio's story transitions from Florence and Venice to Rome.

The city of Rome in *Brotherhood* is a sprawling metropolis (three to four times the size of *AC2*'s Florence) but a little behind the Renaissance era in terms of technology and art. Though Ezio's purpose there is assassination, the over-arching story of *Brotherhood* is much broader, building a tale of how Ezio's actions against the Roman factions help bring the Renaissance to Rome.

"Ezio will become a leader, someone who unites the struggling Assassin order." *—Jeffery Yohalem*

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FOLLOW ASSASSIN'S CREED BROTHERHOOD ON TWITTER @assassinscreed

Renaissance man

In that regard, your motivations are new. While the focus remains entirely mastering the art of assassination, *Brotherhood* isn't just about revenge, it's about power; creating your own power center in Rome and taking on the son of the Pope, one Cesare Borgia. "You have to build your guild—your brotherhood—so you're recruiting assassins by helping citizens in the city," says Desilets. "Those rebels without a cause will become assassins, and you can send them on missions. It's a little bit like a *Mafia Wars* type of gameplay inside *Brotherhood*."

"This time around Ezio has matured. He is more than 40-years-old; he sees a much bigger picture," explains script-writer, Jeffrey Yohalem. "Ezio will become a leader, someone who unites the struggling Assassin order against the forces of the Borgia and the Templars." This leadership role, assembling a brotherhood of recruited assassins, is what drives the new gameplay. As the man in charge, you'll send members of your team to perform hits, choosing members based on their unique skills and equipping them how you see fit. Give a recruit a crossbow and he'll attack from a distance. Hand him a rapier and he'll get up close and personal on his targets.

Creed's combat is also getting an overhaul, putting more emphasis on aggression. To enable larger encounters with multiple attackers, Ezio will be able to link ranged and melee attacks, perform kicks and unload combos. "Our motto is strike first, strike fast," says Lead Game Designer Patrick Plourde.

Predator and prey

Introducing an online multiplayer angle is a significant leap for a franchise that has made its name on its carefully crafted single-player story. And *Creed*'s classic sequence—approaching a target, performing an assassination, and then hauling ass to your escape—didn't translate well to multiplayer. According to Desilets,



And then, out of nowhere, came Captain Hook!



When life hands you cannonballs, make cannonade.

"Your ornate belt betrays you once again, Balthazar!"

Wanted mode: *ACB*'s chain of death We wrote the word "ass" 12 times in this graphic!





The butcher, the breaker, the gravestone-maker.

the team in France iterated on prototypes for multiplayer modes for the past two years before hitting upon Wanted mode.

Wanted mode (other modes will be revealed later) works amazingly well in our playtests, blending intriguing stealth mechanics into the flurry of combat. Sure, we raised a querying eyebrow at the concept of bringing the lone wolf gameplay online, but the time Ubisoft took to test and tweak appears to have been well-spent.

You start as a recruit, working your way to becoming a full-fledged assassin on the streets of Florence, San Donato or Rome. You're assigned a target—another player—to identify and take down. Simple enough? Not quite. Your target may be a priest, but there are lots of NPC priests wandering around the portions of Rome, specifically in place to clutter the multiplayer game. So identifying your actual target becomes about recognizing player traits and movement styles. "A player is more inclined to run than an NPC or AI, players will be the only ones going on rooftops," explains Desilets. "You have to locate him by looking around and watching their behavior."

The avatars you'll have to choose from are themed on period-appropriate "regular" character types, such as the priest, noble, executioner, prowler, doctor and courtesan. This means that while you might see many NPCs resembling your target roaming the streets, identifying your actual target takes a bit of observation, patience and cunning. All the while, you have to be aware of each move they make, as one of them could be your prey.

Now add another wrinkle: any one of these enemies could also be *your* predator. While you're stalking your target, you're being stalked by another player. A warning will flash to let you know if the assassin is closing in, and that's your cue to flee. Each kill and successful escape earns you points.

Points for style

It's not just *who* you kill (you lose points for stabbing innocent civilians) but *how* you do it that nets a higher score. Extra value is placed on techniques with names like Unspotted, Escape, Focus, Silent and Hidden Kill, encouraging you to get creative. Sure, you can kill any other player you see running through the streets, but it's not always worth the effort, since you don't get the same points reward—plus, your aggressive behavior is as good as waving around a great big "Assassinate me!" sign. All of the points you accumulate can then be spent customizing your own avatar with special skills, such as speed boosts and higher jumps. The points will also open up new modes and maps.

Clambering across the rooftops to silently get the drop on your target is a tactic experienced players will quickly get the hang of. But Wanted plays out at a pace that shouldn't terrify newcomers. It's not so much about twitch as it is about observation. There's a truly original thrill to getting a warning that an assassin is on your tail, giving you just enough time to mingle among a group of similarly-attired NPCs, blend into the scenery, then dart to escape when the danger evaporates. Similarly, the excitement of leaping across buildings to close on your target, then catching him in your sights and delivering a silent, fatal blow is uniquely rewarding.

There's a truly original thrill to getting a warning that an assassin is on your tail.

Escape artist

Each location is designed to allow for fast-paced, free running pursuits. Ubisoft revealed that beams, corner swings and other devices will be designed to break after being used by a player, giving an edge to the target in an escape.

You can also use cunning to avoid capture. When you're being pursued, you can toss a smoke bomb or disguise yourself in another target's clothes. You'll even be able to dress unwitting NPCs in your attire to throw any aggressors off your getaway path.

All of this action, surrounded by an environment so exquisitely detailed and voiced (Nolan North and Roger Craig Smith reprise their roles as Desmond and Ezio, respectively) make it clear that Ubisoft has invested fully and skimped on nothing. Presentation and production values have always been a point of pride in *AC*'s history to date, and *Brotherhood* is on pace to be worthy of the name. ■

Rob Smith



"Into danger, Lollipop! Ride!"



Assassins always get the best seats at the World Cup.



So many linens and feathers. Whose silk is mightier?

Release NOVEMBER 16



We like to call this "Mutant Tyson's Punch-Out."

FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

PLAYED IT Gambling, mutant-boxing and wifenapping in Sin City

Along *New Vegas*'s long, still-lit street of ritz and hotels, I step into Tops Casino, one of the less-imposing blots against the night sky. Tops is busy. In the back, there's a theater, with shows organized and performed by a Sammy Davis Jr. lookalike. I chat with him—it turns out that pseudo-Sammy wants performers, people in and around Vegas who can carry a tune or move a little on stage. He hands me four business cards, kicking off a new quest. It's one of the notable differences with this *Fallout* and the previous one: new quests crop up with happy regularity.

On the casino floor, there's high-stakes, hardcore gambling. The blackjack and roulette games are elementary in their application—characters with a high luck attribute will be bringing in the big bucks, rolling jackpots on slot machines. Two of the game's confirmed factions—the slave-taking Caesar's Legion and the New California Rangers—even have their own separate currencies from the classic bottlecap coins.

Meeting a New California Ranger was my favorite moment in our hands-on.

I watch as the sniper draws a bead, popping the target's head like a squeezed egg.

Away from Vegas and back out on the wastes (picture the Capital Wasteland, but with blue skies), I find an NCR soldier on duty inside the mouth of a twenty foot plastic dinosaur. He's protecting Novac, a settlement sprung up around a motel and the aforementioned dino, named after a busted "no vacancy" sign. I chat with the NCR dude as he pops ghouls and other nefarious desert wanderers—he's a sniper. It turns out someone has nabbed his wife, selling her into slavery. Novac is a small place—it had to be one of his neighbors who did the wifenapping. Time for some sleuthing.

Obsidian wants to up the importance of conversation, bringing the skills you previously used on the field into dialog. In Vegas, I was able to call on my advanced sneaking powers to smuggle my firearms into a strict no-guns casino. The option to try this pops up in regular conversation, with your actual skill determining whether a conversational gambit is successful or not. Back in Novac, I have to use all my wiles to work out who hated the NCR sniper's wife enough to actually sell her. Wiles, or, y'know, stealing stuff.



Don't bring a scarf to a knife fight. They tangle easily.



My new friend: an NCR sniper, perched in the mouth of a dinosaur.

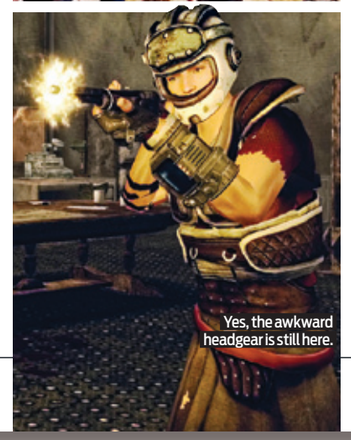
In sneak mode, I duck behind a desk, spying a suspicious floor-set safe (anyone with *Fallout 3* experience knows turning invisible is as easy as crouching), and convince it open with a familiar lockpicking minigame. There's damning evidence in the steel box—a contract handed to slavers. Time for some frontier justice. The ranger told me to bring the culprit out in front of the dinosaur's mouth when he was on duty and don a red beret as a signal. Luring the woman-seller out with the promise of something interesting outside, I watch as the sniper draws a bead, popping the target's head like a squeezed egg.

This kind of super-visceral fighting is back in New Vegas, the time-pausing V.A.T.S. system still a tradeoff between *Fallout*'s roleplaying roots and standard first person shootery. New Vegas looks like a fuller, funner *Fallout*. ■

Rich McCormick



If you lose, can you murder the dealer? Here's hoping.



Yes, the awkward headgear is still here.

READ ME
PUBLISHER Bethesda
DEVELOPER Obsidian
LINK fallout.bethsoft.com

Release SUMMER 2010



This Stalker actually looked worse *before* I eviscerated it.



Hasta la vista, babies.



"I, Flashlight Fist, destroyer of light, welcome you to Tesco Station."



Oh god, Lady Gaga's soul has escaped!

DEAD SPACE 2

FIRST LOOK Kneecapping reanimated corpses, just because you can

Dismemberment is not a nice word. But when dealing with dead humans, peeled apart and reassembled, all their wobbly, fatty, shiny bits on display, you get to feel comfortable with lasering their limbs off until you can stomp them to death. That was *Dead Space*. Gory, grim survival horror.

Dead Space 2 has a new, horrible word in its dictionary: impalement. It's a return to the battle with the Necromorphs for Isaac Clarke, survivor of the first game. On Titan, one of Saturn's moons, the aliens are spilling from a man-made breach in a place called "The Sprawl." As the only person to survive an outbreak, Isaac zips into his suit and gets impaling.

EA introduced me to *Dead Space*'s unique menagerie in the darkness of a mine. The first to attack from the depths was a Stalker: a sneaky, flanking man-dog thing that creeps up on you to get within melee range. Their slow movement makes them perfect for impaling. Then I activated Clarke's slow-motion stasis mode, impeding the creature even more. Then the impaler came out. It took two spikes to weaken the nasty horror before the third rammed it into a wall, leaving it dangling there like a scab.

There's more to impalement, though.

Reanimated babies crawl toward you. Their swollen stomachs pop in a gloopy explosion

The spikes have an alt-fire, either a burst of electricity or flame. You can use a creature's durability against itself: pumping enough bolts to keep it walking, then leading it into a group of enemies and electro-'sploding them all for some easy crowd-control.

One target for that tactic are Crawlers: reanimated babies that crawl across the floor toward you. Their swollen stomachs pop in a gloopy explosion. If you pick them off early enough, you can use them to take out any nearby abominations. Yes, they're zombie baby grenades.

Even the scenery, which felt like a static backdrop in the original, breaks into Necromorph-slicing chunks: shards of glass, debris and even body parts can be used with Isaac's telekinesis. In one building he was confronted by The Pack: a group of naked childlike aliens that swipe with extruded claws. Isaac shattered a window, and the change in air pressure dragged debris and aliens out of the hole, pulling Issac towards the void, too. Handily, I shot a bullet-activated emergency shutter to save myself.

It might sound like this is a run-down-the-corridors, hundred-bullets-per-minute redesign, but *Dead Space 2* remains a slow-paced sci-fi game. The action is still glacial, and there are still awful, ugly things hidden in the dark. ■

Craig Pearson

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LINK deadspace.ea.com

Release WINTER 2010



"Ma'am, there's living carnage where your legs should be. I'm afraid I'm going to have to laser you."

Gemini System
Colony of Barracus
1400 Hours

GEMINI RUE

The Barracan summer is much nicer.

PLAYED IT Meet the sci-fi noir adventure game with combat

The blade runner—uh…the *suspiciously Harrison Ford-like* cop from off-world—awaits your instruction on a dingy city street. Rain dapples his fedora. The sky is purple. The cop is wearing a suit. All the ingredients for a sci-fi noir adventure experience are in place—why can't more point-and-click games be like this?

I secure my target's room number and approach a drab apartment building. At the door, my knocks go unanswered, so I select the hand icon that corresponds with "USE," and select my lock picks. No luck—the deadbolt is electronic. I get better luck next door—the neighbor's apartment is an easy break-in. I crawl across the fire escape and smash the glass of the sliding door with a metal pipe.

In terms of mechanics, that's about as complex as the indie award-winner *Gemini Rue* gets. You won't find any outlandish item combinations or fancy puzzle solutions here. When you're trying to escape a super-secret facility where they reprogram normal citizens into mindless assassins, just grab a screwdriver and go for the nearest grate—you'll figure something out.

Rue's low-res artwork seductively draws you into the mystery.

That 2-D point-and-clickery is broken up by two important features: gunplay and character-swapping. At the start of an action sequence, your character drops behind cover, bracing his shoulder against a crate or similar obstacle. From there, you pounce in and out of a firing stance with A and D. The Ctrl key lets you hold your breath—pull the trigger at the right time, and you'll pull off an insta-killing headshot. Later, you also have the ability to select between multiple targets. The gunfights are rigid in their current state, but the timing mini-game livens up *Rue*'s more plodding moments.

Character-swapping serves the same purpose. *Rue* alternates between the story of the seasoned cop and that of Delta-Six, a prisoner of Center 7, a detention facility where an unseen director blares instructions down sterile corridors. By clicking an icon, you can switch between Center 7 and the grimy city at will. When you can't figure how to kill the lights and take out a few guards in the city, being able to flash to Center 7 and work on a different puzzle can mitigate the frustration. My only hope is that more of these actions will directly affect the world of the other character.

Defiantly low-res, *Rue's* artwork seductively draws you into the mystery. Hand-painted backgrounds seem to intentionally obfuscate scenes, mirroring the ambiguity in its narrative. For what the paint smears, the pixilation—in sharp contrast—coats the world in a coarse grit. At its best, the art style believably presents a single pixel moth flitting beneath the lamp of a syndicate boss; at its worst, you can't distinguish a drain sludge pixel from the ID card pixel that you desperately need to open a door.

Rue ought to ponder that a bit before release, as well as tidy up some confusing command and path-finding issues. But considering how ubiquitous platformers and puzzlers have become in the indie gaming scene, *Rue*'s serious, thoughtful, mysterious sci-fi noir adventure game is a classy, welcome nod to two great genres. ■

Robert Hathorne

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Spoiler alert: everyone in this room hates you.

Synchronizing popping out of cover with holding your breath takes a bit of trial and error.

The future: less cars, less people, yet somehow more litter.

Junker ship and maverick pilot: check. Holo-chess, not quite.

Where was the transport going?

Release WINTER 2010



Damned scorpion-bees. Can't a man open a Coke unmolested?

ARCANIA: GOTHIC 4

FIRST LOOK We take a walk around *Gothic 4*'s welcoming new lands



Arcania: Gothic 4 has a tutorial. That's kind of a big statement from the new developers of this infamously tough medieval hack and slash RPG series. Ever-considerate, Spellbound wants to give us time to get a feel for its sprawling world before launching every pointy thing it can at our soft, pulpy faces.

The new developers (Spellbound also made *Desperados 2*) have new rules for *Gothic 4*. But the game's foundations are still familiar: you're an unnamed hero—your home village is razed by the king's warring forces. You journey across three separate islands picking up quests, perfecting skills, raiding dungeons and heading inexorably towards a showdown with the monarch.

Veterans of the series will notice a softening of the game's attitude toward the player. Is that a mini-map? Are those *quest markers*? They are. *Gothic* is a big place. Necessary help now adorns every facet of it, and although it can be toggled off to return the game to fashion something akin to the hardcore *Gothic* attitude of old, *Gothic 4* will never be as challenging as the previous games.

For example: the combat paced in a way that makes it easier to adapt. Your abilities range from melee to magic (ice, fire, electrical) all tweakable within a skill-tree that allows points to be distributed along lots of branches. The nuts and bolts of skeleton-whacking is pleasantly direct, with the meatless bone-hags crumbling under your mighty sword blows. These bad guys boast their own unique attack patterns—spamming the hit button really won't do when you're face-to-knee with a troll, for example, but paying attention to the in-game combo marker (your sword glows when it's time to strike), will slice the giant down to size.

Plucking the game from the arms of another developer hasn't stopped Spellbound from taking some bold steps towards a more playable game. It's been a good while since a hack-and-slash RPG made much of a splash, and the previous *Gothic* games were always too challenging to gather much support beyond the fanbase. *Spellbound*'s tweaks to the formula might offend the people that prop the game up, but they're certainly the right thing to do. ■

Craig Pearson

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PUBLISHER JoWood

DEVELOPER Spellbound

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Release WINTER 2010

Release Meter

Here at *PC Gamer*, we call upon a variety of obscure rituals to acquire fine information. Every month, The Meter of Release demands a blood sacrifice to illuminate the pure, calendartastic truth within it. Through June, we have slain enough Nazis, zombies, wolves, aliens, dinosaurs, crab people and Zerglings to sate our stunning time-obelisk. With it, we reveal the future. Behold!

Q3 2010	
Arcania: Gothic 4	JoWood
Brink	Bethesda
Dead Rising 2	Capcom
Disciples III: Renaissance	Kalypso
F.E.A.R. 3	Warner Bros.
Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days	Square Enix
Mafia II	2K
LEGO Harry Potter: Years 1-4	Warner Bros.
Rise of Prussia	Paradox
R.U.S.E.	Ubisoft
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Test Drive Unlimited 2	Atari
Two Worlds II	SouthPeak
Victoria II	Paradox

Q4 2010	
Battlestar Galactica Online	Bigpoint
Call of Duty: Black Ops	Activision
Crysis 2	EA
DeathSpank	Hothead
Deus Ex: Human Revolution	Square Enix
Elemental: War of Magic	Stardock
Fallout: New Vegas	Bethesda
Frozen Synapse	Mode 7 Games
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	Ubisoft
Lionheart: King's Crusade	Paradox
Medal of Honor	EA
Need For Speed World Online	EA
Rage	Betheda Softworks
Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad	TBD
Sid Meier's Civilization V	2K Games
Subversion	Introversion
World of Tanks	Wargaming.net
World of Warcraft: Cataclysm	Blizzard

2011: THE TOMORROW ZONE	
American McGee's Alice II	EA
Diablo III	Blizzard
Guild Wars 2	NCSoft
Jagged Alliance 3	Bit-Composer
Mass Effect 3	EA
MechWarrior	(TBD)
Monaco	Pocketwatch Games
Portal 2	Valve
Rock of Ages	ACE Team
Star Wars: The Old Republic	EA



The guns are surprisingly satisfying for a non-shooter.

THE CATACLYSM COMETH

RELEASE WINTER

Azeroth is under attack. Welcome to the new age of **WORLD OF WARCRAFT** *by Tim Edwards*

There's an achievement in *Catalcysm* called "Surveying the Damage." It's a reward for exploring the *new* old world. The world that launched 11.5 million subscriptions. The world that will be no more following *Cataclysm*'s launch.

It's a carrot to encourage us to go back and rediscover the reinvigorated continents of Kalimdor and Eastern Kingdoms. In a room in Blizzard's headquarters in Irvine, California, with a live connection to the *World of Warcraft* closed beta servers, the urge to start working towards that new achievement is irresistible. I'm a level 80 druid, and I've just turned into a bird. I rise out of Ogrimmar, and rotate the camera to take in the glorious new land. Where to fly to? Who to see? The choice is paralyzing.

Where do we start?

It's a weird time for *Warcraft*. The last major content patch for the second expansion, *Wrath of the Lich King*, has dropped, and most guilds have at least seen, and maybe even beaten the final boss in the game—Arthas, the Lich King. While there are small raids and patches due before the release of *Cataclysm*, these are small-fry changes and interim story updates. *World of Warcraft* is in a holding pattern.

The game may have hit its peak number of subscribers. Since Blizzard announced the game had 11.5 million of them back in 2008, further announcements of growth have been noticeably absent. *Cataclysm* faces multiple tasks. It needs to bring back lapsed players. It needs to provide new content and quests to the long-term hardcore. And it needs to bring the aging and decrepit old world content—some of which was created nearly six or seven years ago, up to the standards of today. No small order.

New world order

A couple of hours before I sat down to play, the usual suspects turned up at Blizzard's plush corporate cinema: *WoW*'s core design team. There's J. Allen Brack, senior producer—tall and wiry. Greg "Ghostcrawler" Street and Tom Chilton, both shorter, shaven-headed, wearing the Blizzard standard *World of Warcraft* T-shirts. There's Alex Afrasiabi—world designer, and Cory Stockton. And then there's us: the journalists. Proudly, the geekiest set of journalists on the planet. And we're hanging on their every word.

They're showing off the new/old world, describing the damage done to Stormwind (say goodbye to the Park District—all that's left is a smoking crater) when new boss baddie Deathwing rips through the earth, the root cause of the titular cataclysm. But, Alex explains, it isn't just about new geography. "We're in a world post-*Lich King*, and the cataclysm comes in a few flavors. We have political upheaval and physical destruction."

The political situation is fluid. Thrall has vacated his post as warchief, leaving that grumpy beefcake Garrosh in charge. He has a new throne room, right by the entrance of a newly fortified Orgrimmar. And he's bulked out—he looks even meaner and more aggressive than before. That's partly due to the mammoth-tusk shoulder pads he's sporting.

It's the uneasy truce between the Forsaken (the undead that turned against Arthas) and the rest of the Horde that will define the future of the Horde faction as a whole, Alex explains. "The Forsaken have come into their own. The prime motivation of their leader, Lady Sylvannas, was seeing Arthas dead. But now she faces new problems. After the events of the Wrathgate (in which the Forsaken bombarded a joint Alliance and Horde army with plague bombs) Garrosh has the Forsaken on a


There's almost nothing that goblins *won't* string lights on.


The new wench class gives +3 bosoms.


BP comes to Azeroth.


Gnomes: champions of the weird hairstyles.

short leash. They're viewed as instruments. Orc officers are infesting their ranks, and they've been dispatched to Gilneas to besiege the city. Meanwhile, they can't procreate—they were created by Arthas himself. With him dead, they need to find a new way to bolster their ranks."

After the demo, I take a moment to fly to Thunder Bluff. The changes to the landscape—the violent upheavals that come with the draconic eruption—are where most of the headlines have focused. But flying around, less geography has changed than I might have expected. Some zones are barely touched—when poking around places like Ferelas, Western Plaguelands, and Dun Morogh, what was noticeable was how few changes I could spot. Other areas are brutally scarred or revised.

Broken world

The Badlands—once a festering pit of bright orange clay cliffs, has come under brutal attack. Entire mountain peaks have been shorn off, leaving polished metallic surfaces. Stranglethorn Vale has been split in two by a giant sinkhole, into which the sea cascades. The Stonewrought Dam has been cracked, and the lake behind has all but dried out. In Azshara, the Goblins have

"We shipped *Lich King* with 1,000 quests. We're tracking around 3,000 in *Cataclysm*."

complemented their new super-weapon with rocket racetracks that zip along the edge of the cliffs. In Ashenvale, a volcano has burst through the forest, lava dripping into the steaming streams. In Thousand Needles, the entire zone has been flooded, while paths wind between bluffs above the water. Dive beneath, and you can still see the old graveyards and centaur camps. It's heartbreaking.

The real change isn't the landscape. It's the quests. Alex explains that the world has been almost entirely re-quested, based on the lessons learned from nearly a decade of *WoW* development. "We shipped *Wrath of the Lich King* with 1,000 quests. We're tracking around 3,000 quests in *Cataclysm*." Now, rather than walking into a town and being greeted with bundles of new quests, you'll be psychologically manipulated.

"We really don't like what being greeted with 15 exclamation marks does to a player. Your brain just shuts off. You don't care about the story, and you don't care about the lore. You just go to your quest map, and head towards the blobs." Now, *Warcraft* quests have a Christmas tree effect: two or three smaller intro quests get you hooked into mini-narratives, and push you around the zones at a smarter, more natural pace.

There are multiple new zones for level 80 players, and each is dramatic and gorgeous: carved landscapes in which the terrain itself tells a story. Mount Hyjal—long-awaited as the scene of one of *Warcraft*'s climactic battles, is a descent into demonic despair. At the top, the World Tree, and verdant forests. Nearby, a vast crater, where Archimonde was finally put to rest. Descend the ledges and you spot Twilight Hammer cultists, and the fiendish remnants of the Burning Legion—including gorgeous glowing red columns of rock.

Deepholme is where Deathwing licked his wounds after a previous defeat. It's the spherical cavern out of which Deathwing burst. Floating (in that very *Warcraft* way) chunks of debris are left behind. At the center: a temple, burnt out and broken. The whole area is devastated.

The Horde and Alliance have explored deep into the cavern in their ludicrous


The Barrens are a lot less barren.


Hungry gate demands food.


Ruins will be prime pickin's for the new Archaeology skill.


Old age wasn't kind to Captain Bucky O'Hare.

airboat gunships. The Alliance ship, the Skybreaker, is still active. But the Horde boat, the Ogrim's Hammer, has crash-landed. Bummer.

Uldum is *WoW* doing Egypt: a place where the Titans (the gods that formed Azeroth) hid their machinery behind holographic projections. The spires that were powering the illusion were knocked offline, revealing everything once hidden inside the "mountains." It has a sphinx, pyramids, and quadrupedal stone-skinned cat people.

This is a place where the new Archeology skill comes into play, which seems designed to obsess achievement collectors. Don't think of it like mining: you don't just whack a hammer on a mineral node until it gives up its history. Instead, you'll find treasure trails and scavenger hunts that take you across the world. Each time you find a new location, you'll get a little text blurb, and an item. Collect the treasures and you'll unlock new entries about *WoW*'s history, or create vanity items such as pets.

Other previously announced systems are also getting an overhaul. The Path of the Titans, once meant to offer character flexibility and progression past the level cap, has been cut. It's gone. "We only want to add complexity if it also adds depth," explains Tom Chilton, lead designer. The incarnation announced at Blizzcon wasn't doing the job. Now, customization comes from deeper and more interesting glyphs created through the Inscription skill. There are now major, medium and minor glyphs

CORPORATE TIMELINE The starting area for the new materialistic Goblin race is hilarious





Northrend's Faceless Ones show their...umm...faces again in *Cataclysm*.

that offer, in order, game-changing power boosts, interesting playstyle options (such as offering cleave classes the chance to hit additional targets) and cosmetic changes.

Similarly, guild talent trees are gone. Guilds will still level up, but the perks they earn are unlocked on a purely linear basis. Each of the 25 guild levels has a perk, including the previously revealed mass resurrection, reduced repair costs, and group teleport. Is Blizzard pushing players towards guilds? Not entirely. The perks are more about improving the guild experience. "We want to make guilds more than just a group chat channel," Tom explains.

Alongside guild levels, every player contributes to the guild experience bar—either through boss kills in raids and dungeons, earning guild achievements, winning rated battlegrounds, or completing quests. Doing so will also raise your personal reputation with the guild, a new feature designed to prevent exploitation of guild boons. As your reputation increases, guild-specific items and rewards will be unlocked on vendors in the capital city. Guild consumables. Bank slots. Guild standards. Guild mounts.

The emphasis on group play ties into Blizzard's further attempts to improve the ease of enjoying raids, continuing the revolution that *Lich King* brought. Tom states that "the amount of raid content that will be included with *Cataclysm* will be broadly the same as *Wrath of the Lich King*."



Druids' new tree form.

There are three raid dungeons at launch. First up: the Throne of the Four Winds, held inside the Skywall region, the home of the air elementals. Even in its early state, this is nothing less than the most gorgeous zone *WoW* has ever seen. It's a flying temple, curving towers held up by, and on, whispy fogs of white clouds. The ivory palisades are interspersed with gems—stories tall—and they stretch up forever. It's going to require a flying mount. "We liked the idea of the Occulus," says Greg Street, referring to the similarly suspended dungeon. "We just don't want to make you fight on the back of a dragon again."

The second dungeon is more prosaic: the Bastion of Twilight—an underground lair housing the bastards responsible for Deathwing's ascent.

Indomitable gall

Leading them is the two-headed ogre Cho'Gall (and one-time star of *Warcraft II*). But between him and you are multiple bosses. The Bastion of Twilight is meant to be the major dungeon of the expansion, equivalent to Naxxramas. It's a dank, dreary place—purple metal pillars dripping in oil and lava. But there's more to do in the Bastion of Twilight after you've killed Cho'Gall. "We were really pleased with the Algalon encounter in *Lich King*," says Greg Street. "And we want every dungeon to have a similar 'prestige' boss." These bosses are unlocked by completing certain hard modes—in the raid dungeons of Ulduar, Algalon was unlocked after ludicrously tough fights and volunteering for extra pain. It ended up a popular choice, as *WoW*'s hardcore often embrace masochism.

In front of Cho'Gall is a pit. And in that pit, as Greg leads the camera *slightly* too far ahead, I spot a clutch of eggs. Lore hounds will understand the implication. Cho'Gall might be hiding the Brood Mother.



All around Kalimdor, the Horde aggressively takes to the seas.



Looks like it's murloc o'clock.



"I like dese spikes, but what dis new 'Mastery' stat do for me?"

And the changes to the raid system just keep on coming. 25-man raids can now be downsized to the 10-man version at any time, allowing groups to continue raiding the dungeon even if not all the raid members make it back for a second night. Once you change the size, though, it's saved as a 10-man encounter until the weekly reset. That, says Blizzard, is to stop ruthless guilds from kicking weak players for one boss, then reverting to the larger group for the next pack.

Chilton explains that the reason behind limiting players to one overall attempt at a raid was to help those who felt obliged to give both versions a shot every week, turning a compelling storyline into a grind. "It wasn't too bad in Trial of the Crusader," he says, "because it was such a short instance, it was a light time investment. But it became pretty brutal in Icecrown."

The other big change to raids announced affects raid swapping. Currently, if you're saved to a Naxxramas raid, you can't join anyone else's until the weekly reset. But in *Catacylsm*, as long as a raid hasn't killed any bosses that you've already killed that week, you can join it. This is a great example of how Blizzard is progressing past technical limitations to design the game based on what works best for the players, not what its tech can handle.

A flying temple, curving towers held up by wispy white clouds.

Finally, there are small tweaks to the way PvP combat works. Two battlegrounds are coming, both new creations of old formulas. Twin Peaks revives Capture the Flag with two towers facing each other across a verdant valley. In between, there's a small stream and a couple of small buildings. The only tweak: graveyards in the midfield, to create more carnage.

The Battle for Gilneas will be more chaotic—it's a Capture and Hold affair, set inside the burning city of Gilneas. You'll be engaging in street-to-street combat—a flatter, more urban Arathi Basin.

Battlegrounds

System changes should help the uptake of PvP in *Catachysm*. Top tier currency is earned from rated battlegrounds and arenas, while PuG leagues are almost certain to emerge now that you can arrange private skirmishes outside of the battleground matchmaking algorithm.

Catachysm is a strange beast, but an exciting one. *WoW* earned its place by being better than its competitors. It offered better quests, better landscapes, and better group play. Other games have since overtaken *WoW* on early quest polish—but no one has offered the complete package. Meanwhile, Blizzard's developers just learn and learn. Yet as I flew over Azeroth, surveying the damage, I was less impressed than I expected to be. I wanted a whole new world—I got the same world, tweaked.

But the new quests are what's going to make *WoW* work again. As the demo wound down, I created a level one Gnome, wondering if he'd start in the new city of Gnomeregan, or back in good old Dun Morogh. The camera zoomed in to the familiar landscape of the current gnomish starting area. I remember the first quest, from the first time I loaded *WoW*. Back then, my task was to kill ten gray troggs. I've no idea why I continued to play.

As the camera pulled back, and I took control, I looked ahead. The same troggs were there, but they'd broken through the gates, and were *attacking* the quest giver. He was beating them back with a stick. It's the same world. Different context. That's not damage. That's improvement. ■

LIGHT FROM THE DARKNESS

The making of **TORCHLIGHT**—how years of grinding led to the modern *Diablo* **by Martin Davies**

Diablo casts a long shadow over the action-RPG. Few games have been able to dispel Blizzard's gloomy dominance of the genre, though many have tried. Only *Torchlight* shines in the dark.

A modest game in scale and price, made in a year by a small team, it is as accomplished a resurrection of the genre as anyone could want. It's cheery and accessible too, doing as much as it can to delight the player as they mop up hordes of monsters in its colorful, randomized dungeons. Now its developer, Runic Games, plans to transform this small-game success into a platform for an MMO based on the *Torchlight* world.


Torchlight shook up a staid genre.


Every Runic employee gets one hour a day with the genius cap.

Despite its unassuming, accessible look, *Torchlight*'s creation was a far from trivial task. Its DNA can be traced back to its makers' work on the original *Diablo*, after which their careers criss and cross the wiki pages of MMO and RPG history. Its long gestation survived the unraveling of Flagship Studios and their almost-made *Mythos*—a *Diablo*-style MMO that sank along with Flagship in August 2008. It was only a month away from beta.

Yet within 24 hours of Flagship's dissolution, the *Mythos* team had started anew, more determined than ever. A month later they formed Runic Games. Then, by October the following year, there was *Torchlight*.

"I guess it started back in 1993," says Runic Games' CEO, Max Schaefer. "Rather than get real jobs and be responsible people, my brother Erich, David Brevik and I decided to start a game company. We were called Condor Incorporated. We cut our teeth on Gameboy and Game Gear games, and ended up doing a Sega Genesis game called *Justice League Task Force*. It was a *Street Fighter*-style game with Batman, Wonder Woman and Superman. The publisher had another company entirely make the Super Nintendo version, but didn't put us in touch with them. We met them at one of the big game conventions and, of course, we had an instant rivalry—but they were really nice guys and we became friendly. They turned out to be the group that started Blizzard, although they had the horrible name of 'Silicon and Synapse' at the time. Anyway, when we were looking for the next thing to do, we decided we wanted to make a PC game because we didn't know which console was going to be the next big thing and didn't want to bet on it. So we wandered 'round the shows with our pitch packets looking for someone to give us money. The Blizzard guys were one of the few that gave us the time of day. They signed us to make *Diablo*. And off we went. Then, half way through making it they acquired us and we became Blizzard North."

Over the early '90s, Blizzard North grew to a 60-man company, creating the subsequent *Diablo* expansions and sequel. But the Schaefers got nervous about the corporate ownership of Blizzard. They'd been passed between so many different divisions of parent company Vivendi that no one could keep track of who their bosses were.

"We would read on Yahoo! News every day about who they were going to sell us to next," says Max. "We decided we wanted to be in charge of our own fate again, so a bunch of us left Blizzard North and started Flagship Studios. We started at a good time. Publishers were throwing around money, and wanted to hear stories about how you were going to do the next great thing. So we started *Hellgate: London* which was going to do everything for everybody."

"We decided we wanted to be in charge of our own fate again, so a bunch of us left Blizzard."

Flagship, needless to say, did not meet expectations with *Hellgate: London*. It was meant to be the AAA breakout monster hit – an MMO that was a perfect amalgam of *Half-Life* and *Diablo*'s finest features. It was, instead, a total disaster. But while Max Schaefer is frank about the mistakes that were made at Flagship, it's clear that, alongside over-promising, Flagship fell victim to circumstances outside their control.

"I don't want to throw anyone under the bus," says Max Schaefer. "But there were a lot of logistical things that went wrong with *Hellgate: London*. For example, our primary PC publisher ran into some trouble. MMOs take a considerable amount of operations. You have to be able to take people's money, you have to do customer support, run servers—that was supposed to be done by other people, and yet half way through the project it was announced that they weren't going to be able to fulfill that, and so we had to figure out how to do it ourselves. We didn't really have any money for it, we had to hire up quickly and it stretched our management thin. It was just one more thing that made it too much to do in the budget and the time we had available."

While the troubles on *Hellgate* edged the company closer to the abyss, more promising developments were underway at the studio's Seattle branch—itself something of a serendipitous creation.

"*Mythos* began as a test of the network infrastructure we were making for *Hellgate*," Max Schaefer recalls. "We just needed a couple of guys doing something super basic to make sure it worked. That's when we hired Travis Baldree."

Travis Baldree, creator of *Fate*, a *Diablo* clone much admired by *Diablo*'s original developers, interviewed at Flagship several months prior, but turned the job down, due to the hassle of relocating to San Francisco with a two-month-old baby in tow.

"Somebody struck on the idea of doing a small test game, the canary in the mine shaft, to prove *Hellgate*'s network tech in front of the launch," says Baldree, now president of Runic Games. "So I got the opportunity to work on that remotely. What became *Mythos* was just me, working out of my house. I was Flagship Seattle for about six months."

It became quickly apparent that *Mythos* had potential.

"There was some talk around the office that this was the game we should have been making in the first place," says Erich Schaefer, Runic Games' chief creative officer, and brother of Max Schaefer. "So we said, let's turn this into a real project—it'll still work as a network test, but let's staff it up and make it into a real game."

But even with that decision made, the future of *Mythos* seemed far from certain.

"For the entire time we were making that game we were essentially putting a square peg into a round hole," says Max Schaefer. "It was rough—it's not how you'd want to make a game."

"It was not a normal or natural development cycle," agrees Baldree. "There was a lot of reassessment of game features. The game changed significantly over the course of its life as expectations changed. Initially it really was supposed to be a one-person project, and the scale was based around that, and as it grew we had more people and more energy to invest."

And then, just as the project approached beta, Flagship came apart entirely. The *Mythos* team lost everything they'd worked on, with the game's IP and assets promptly sold off to South Korean MMO publisher HanbitSoft. Not a single pixel or line of code could be rescued.


Can *Torchlight*'s accessibility make it work as an MMO?

It was "horribly demoralizing," Max Schaefer admits. "These guys had put a couple of years of work into *Mythos* and, boy, it was just snatched away at the last minute. It was a really horrible time. You could see it crashing like a train in slow motion. It didn't happen overnight. It was hard to watch. In the later stages of blowing up, I was saying to my brother, we've got to take a year off after this and decompress. But then we realized that we'd lose the team unless we jumped on it and made something happen."

"The day after Flagship shut down, everyone got together in my backyard and said: 'Hey, we're going to start up again,'" says Baldree. "So we moved about five blocks, bought all our old equipment at liquidation and started Runic. We were incorporated within the month—and that was only because of the paperwork."

"My brother, myself and Peter Hu [another *Diablo II* and *Hellgate* stalwart, now Runic's CTO] threw in some money just to keep the door open and set about looking for a publisher," says Max. "We wanted to do something quickly—

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW *Torchlight*'s incestuous family tree

CONDOR INCORPORATED

BLIZZARD NORTH
Condor Incorporated pitches *Diablo* and is signed by Blizzard, only to then be acquired during development, becoming Blizzard North.

BLIZZARD

DIABLO



FLAGSHIP STUDIOS
Some of Blizzard North's founders get "antsy" with corporate shenanigans and leave to form Flagship Studios and make *Hellgate: London*.

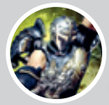
TRAVIS BALDREE

WILD TANGENT

FATE
Travis Baldree makes *Fate* for Wild Tangent, heavily inspired by *Diablo* and its sequel, but bringing innovation to the genre.



HELLGATE LONDON



MYTHOS
Travis Baldree is asked to make a small game to test *Hellgate*'s network infrastructure. It quickly becomes something much bigger.

RUNIC GAMES

TORCHLIGHT
Flagship implodes, selling off their intellectual property, including the near-beta *Mythos*. The *Mythos* team immediately forms Runic Games to make *Torchlight* from scratch.

partly to get money in the door, but mostly just to get something on the shelves so the guys could clear the whole *Mythos* tragedy out of their heads."

"By the end of *Mythos*'s development we really knew what we wanted to be doing," says Baldree. "We'd bumped into most of the walls we were going to bump into, faced most of the pitfalls. We had a pretty good idea of what would make a successful MMO action-RPG. In starting Runic, one of the big lessons from Flagship was not to attempt more than you can safely complete. So right from the beginning we talked about having an intermediate step: we'd do a single-player first, get our feet under us."

"There were advantages to starting over, although it was painful," says Erich Schaefer. "All *Mythos*'s technology started with *Hellgate* and it wasn't really appropriate. The graphics engine was designed with *Hellgate*'s over-the-shoulder perspective in mind. Even though it took a little time to ramp up with *Torchlight*, we could make stuff that was more appropriate for us. Better performance is one obvious result."

"We put a lot of emphasis right at the start on good development tools," says Max. "We had an ambitious schedule, so we set out to make tools that would make everyone as productive as possible—and because we'd already had a dry run at making this game, everyone had a wishlist of things that would make their tools that much better. Level designers could test levels and quests in the editor without having to bug a programmer. That really sped up development. Secondly, we set out to make a game that would run on everyone's machines. Low minimum specs were a big, big point for us."

"We ended up using the Ogre 3D engine, which is open source," says Baldree. "It doesn't really cost anything, and it's got really great support for older hardware. And given the size of the development team we didn't want to spend a ton of time developing the latest pixel shader for a graphics card that only 20 or 30 people have."

WHAT MAKES TORCHLIGHT SHINE?
The secret action-RPG formula

There's much more to *Torchlight*'s success than a small price tag. The two-decade sum of the team's action-RPG experience has been applied to its design. Runic says the reason that a *Diablo* clone has yet to eclipse *Diablo* is that they rarely copy the right things. So what *are* the right things to copy?



PINATA ACTION
"It should be extremely satisfying to hit things, and shiny stuff should pop out," says Baldree. "That basic activity should be hugely rewarding." Hordes of enemies should splatter before you, but there must be some semblance of challenge.



MASTER THE RANDOM
"Making randomized stuff enjoyable and balanced is difficult," says Baldree. "The handcrafted route looks wonderful but limits your replayability. It's also very easy to make soupy randomized stuff, so everything is samey."



PICK UP THE PACE
Randomized levels are tricky to pace, says Erich Schaefer: "It can be too easy, too fast, too discouraging. You need a good sense of progression throughout the game. There's got to be new monsters, new skills and new dynamics all the way."



DE-HASSLE HACK-'N'-SLASH
Torchlight takes pains to reduce obstructions. It does away with inventory *Tetris*, it borrows the pets from *Fate*, who scurry back to town to sell your loot, and introduces "save anywhere." As Baldree says , it respects the player's time.



BE OBVIOUS
"You should be able to play a game like this without opening a manual," says Max Schaefer. "The left button should always do the obvious thing. And the right button should do the second thing you'd do in any given situation."



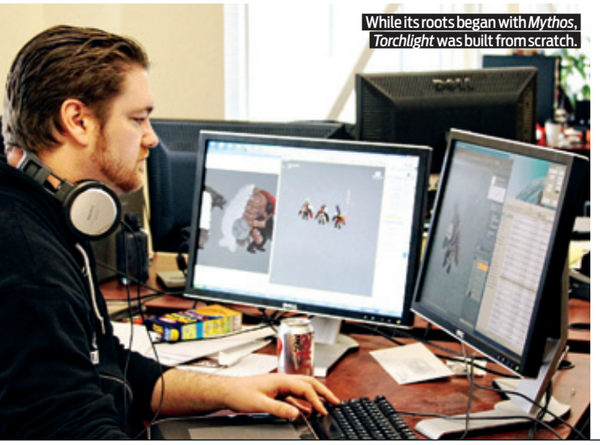
DON'T FEAR THE FUNNY
"We wanted to be a little bit goofier to avoid being directly compared to *Diablo*," says Max Schaefer. "But all these games are comedies at heart. The fields of enemies, tiny monsters carrying chainmail—the whole construct is absurd."



APPEAL TO THE CROWD
Torchlight's steampunky, caricatured style happily rebels against somberly-styled fantasy RPGs. "We decided to make our game more colorful... A global MMO that could appeal across Asia was always in the back of our minds."

The result is something that the team refers to as a AAA-casual title—a small, polished creation that matches the production values of major developments with the economic ethos and accessibility of indie development. Baldree points to a gap in the market for quality "impulse buy" games outside the myriad *Bejeweled* clones. Lower price points and easy digital distribution also make it a more appealing prospect in these days of high piracy concerns.

"We were rebelling against the whole five-year 30-million-dollar project," says Max Schaefer. "Partly because it had just blown up our company, obviously—but also I don't think it serves gamers all that well. You just don't get that many games coming out. I mean, what's it been? Nearly ten years since the last *Diablo*? And part of it is because the giant scope and budget of each project. I don't think it really results in substantially better games. Obviously *WoW* is an exception, and there are others. But as game makers we kind of feel that more ideas and faster projects are better for our psyches. So we thought there was a gap in the market in between casual games and these bloated Hollywood-style projects, which would give people good gaming experiences, and new ideas without taking five years and costing 50 bucks for the consumer."



While its roots began with *Mythos*, *Torchlight* was built from scratch.

It's an ethos that Runic is applying to its future developments—principle among which is a massively multiplayer *Torchlight* game. In keeping with its affordable, accessible forebear, the as-yet-untitled MMO is intended for release as free-to-play, supported by microtransactions.

"The general vision is to have an MMO that plays as much like the single-player as we can get it," Baldree says. "It'll have the same focus on relatively fast action: carving your way through hordes of monsters with a large number of hugely devastating skills. The MMO will obviously be different in that there'll be large static shared spaces that will not be randomized. That's one of the things we learned from *Mythos*: you lose a sense of community and place if everything is randomized. So we decided to do a mix of the two."

Maintaining the tactile feel and relentless pace of combat will also be challenging when player numbers increase, and Runic has been busy experimenting, using its own *Torchlight* multiplayer hack.

"The game has to be solo-able," says Baldree, "but players still have to have skills that make them useful in a party and encourage them to work together. It's a bit of a balancing act."

There are other challenges too: defining longer term goals, cultivating trade skills and commerce, building guild systems and PvP support, overhauling the character classes and introducing extensive character customization.

Runic has also been keeping a close eye on *Torchlight*'s inventive modding community. "It's been useful to look at what people think are the most important things to change in the game," says Baldree. "The class mod stuff is the most fun, seeing people take the skills apart and put them back in new ways. Somebody made this steampunk robot class mod that fires missiles and had a machine gun. A lot of people also don't like item identification. If we keep it we are going to make it less onerous. Some of the things we're talking about are making identification automatic for items that are lower than your level. Or a passive lore skill that could automatically identify stuff for you within a certain range of levels."

One of the biggest questions that remains is how Runic will make money out of their MMO. While the exact breakdown of purchasable items is still nebulous, the team has taken a principled stance. "I will never, ever buy a microtransaction item," says Baldree. "I am that kind of player. And the game has to be enjoyable for me too. We don't want our monetization stuff to offer ways to skip the game because the game is boring. We don't want it to feel like an enormous grind, or that you want to get past a bit because it sucks. It should be fun to play and you should want to do it; what you should be paying for is variance—additions that make it more enjoyable. Mounts are a great example. Everybody should be able to get mounts but you should be able to buy super special mounts that look cool or travel a slight bit faster or give you a secondary benefit."



You won't have to pay for the best gear in the *Torchlight* MMO, Runic says.

Runic has some other interesting ideas: leftovers from *Mythos*'s proposed "cartography" scheme, whereby a player could pay a tiny amount to have a random dungeon rolled especially for them.

"You could control how many bosses you might fight or the number of champions that spawn, or the luck factor in the dungeon," says Baldree. "So if you were in a party situation and you just wanted something quick to do together you could buy an item that'd allow you to do that."

"We don't want to sell anyone the most powerful sword," says Erich Schaefer. "Maybe you can spend more money to increase your chances to getting these things, or speed up your leveling by a reasonable factor. Although it may be that the successful guilds need to spend a little more money, but we'll look into that."

"We talk a lot about guild houses and outfitting them with trainers and quest-givers and stashes," explains Baldree. "But mostly we want the game to be fun."

"I think our overall business philosophy is that we just want to have the widest base possible," says Erich. "We want as many free players as possible. We'll worry about converting a few into payers as a secondary thought."

With the accessible, cheap *Torchlight* filling the gulf between *Diablo*s, Runic has certainly generated goodwill and an eager audience for an MMO sequel.

There's no doubt that the company feels its current fortunes have been hard won. But if the lessons from Flagship were painful, they've ultimately made for a better game.

"It's all water under the bridge," says Baldree of the traumatic last days of Flagship. And given the success of *Torchlight* and bright prospects for its MMO incarnation, it's not hard to see the potential esteem. "In the end, we had a really extended prototyping period on an action-RPG MMO and we got a really great team out of it. It was a net win." ■

"I will never, ever buy a microtransaction item. I'm that kind of player."



When this kind of action works, it's incredibly exciting. The problem is, it doesn't work in *APB*.

Need to know

What is it?
An online city, populated by cops and robbers who get in each others' way as they complete missions

Influenced by
GTA, World of Warcraft

Play it on
Quad-Core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/ Radeon 4850

Alternatively
GTA IV: Episodes from Liberty City (89%)

Copy protection
Subscription

CRIMINAL

Cramming innovative idea on innovative idea, **APB** forgets to get its driving and shooting fundamentals right ***by Rich McCormick***

There were moments in *APB* where I found my heart pounding out of my chest, beating faster than my assault rifle could spend ammunition. Realtime Worlds' online city of San Paro is a place where player-controlled criminals fight player-controlled police on the streets. When this kind of action works, it's incredibly exciting. The problem is, it doesn't work in *APB*.

I'd love it to work: *APB* is a labor of real ambition and a daring step for online games. But at its core, the mechanics don't feel right.

Fundamentally, it's a game about shooting and driving. Cars and guns are your prime means of interaction with the world. Both cops and robbers are tasked with making their way to a point on the map, mowing down resistance between them and their objectives, and then repeating these chores over and over.

Hell on wheels

Procuring transportation is fairly simple: San Paro's streets have their share of cars, easily obtainable with a little door-prying, or, if they're in use, carjacking. Each player also has their own private garage, a set of cars that can be custom-equipped and called into existence by heading down to parking lots around the city.

At the start of every mission I'd go to one of these magic parking lots and summon my *PC Gamer*-emblazoned ride into reality. Climbing in, I'd gun the engine a few times, whoosh up the garage's exit ramp, fire the siren and pump the horn before daring to turn left, skidding into a row of idiot pedestrians and flipping my beautiful ride onto its back.

Floaty, unresponsive and with an odd mixture of under and then severe over-steering, *APB*'s cars feel like petulant automotive teenagers, never willing to do what you ask. In a game where you're requested to drive fast after other cars driving fast—and you're asked this a *lot*—the game's handling model is wilfully sadistic, forcing you to plan turns a good few hundred yards before intersections.

Bolted down

Compounding the teeth-gnashing frustration is the city's flat-out stupid approach to scenery. Big chain-link fences you can drive right through; small chain-link fences? Nope. Obviously the small fence is orders of magnitude tougher than the big one. Mailboxes, streetlights, random posts—all fair game for smashing. Wooden cable-spools, on the other hand, are glued to the floor and will stop you dead if you so much as graze them. It's infuriatingly inconsistent.

On my typical mission, after much (very much) reversing, car-switching and swearing to dark gods, I reached my destination. On solo missions I was rarely challenged, left to go to my objective and defuse a bomb (press F on it), clean graffiti (press F on it) or secure evidence (press F on it). But I'd found that *APB* works best in groups, so I joined a bigger gang in order to face some real resistance.

The moment you're warned of your new human foes' arrival is *APB*'s peak, with apprehension and second-guessing building to neat little climaxes. With a truck full of fighters, I circled the block I needed to search, aware that my crew was the target of another four-criminal team. Spotting and killing these party crashers gave us a window, a few seconds to complete our goal (guess what button I pressed on it?) and peel out to the next job before our opponents resurrected.

Missions rarely get more complex than that scenario. San Paro's police academy must have a short course—in my time as an Enforcer (aka police officer), every crime was solved by

Mission control

Play through a typical *APB* job with this handy chart



It feels like a placeholder "game" plonked on top of an excellent concept.

pressing F on a thing. Playing solo, I was handed a group of four-stage missions, with something like a car at each spot. Ostensibly there to search for "evidence" or photograph a "crime scene," *APB*'s missions are more brazenly cheap than any "kill 10 boars" quest in more traditional MMOs. Drive, get out, press F. Drive further, get out, press F. It feels like an artifice, a placeholder "game" plonked on top of an excellent concept Realtime Worlds didn't quite know what to do with.

The game's story is frightened, far too timid to impose itself on the action and not even sure it should be there in the first place. Contacts perform little voiceovers before each job, explaining their motivation. Their righteous indignation for a city wracked by crime/vigilantism (depending on your side) is entirely at odds with the city outside their door: one where pedestrians give up their cars and stand motionless in the street before disappearing into the ether; where mohawked punk girls drive armored police trucks and sit in their seats as the engine block burns and explodes.

Playing with others certainly eases the tedium of simplistic and repetitive objectives. Getting into a group is a remarkably easy task: I'd join a server, elect to "look for a group," and be playing along with other San Paroans (San Paro-ites?) in minutes. Easy, too, is earning the right to get in a stranger's way and mess with his missions, a simple matter of accepting a randomly generated job. It's an exhilarating exercise when it's on your terms.

Unsportsmanlike

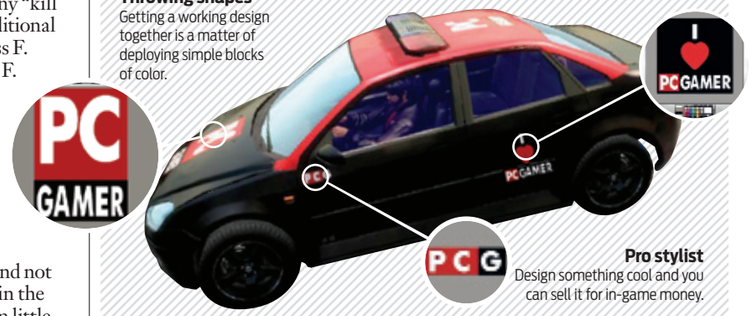
But it rarely is. Coming up against a well-organized posse is fun; facing off against a group who—thanks to the objective point system—know exactly where you are at all times is just infuriating. Too many jobs end with an extended, dragged-out stalemate. I lost count of the groups I faced who'd run toward a high point on the map and hole up, guns trained down to massacre anyone who dared come close. There's no counter to tactics like this, and it kills any desire to keep playing. I ducked in with a couple of new players, repeatedly getting to the penultimate mission stages before being gunned down by terrifyingly efficient death squads in unassailable hidey holes. Bad structuring makes the missions tiresome: it's an approach that's at odds with typical MMOs and their philosophy of constant reward.

Frustration is built into the game at all levels. Eventually getting the jump on one of the guys terrorizing my poor newbies, I unloaded three-shot burst after burst into his back. Whipping around, he fired, annihilating me in a moment: he had a better gun, so he won the duel. Realtime Worlds deserves some credit for taking MMO combat away from behind-the-scenes dice rolls, but this is no equal playground: someone who's played the game for longer will have a better gun and a more powerful character than a new player and will always win in a firefight. Technically, the system is supposed to compensate for skill, matching smaller groups of the best versus big gaggles of initiates, but that wasn't the case in my play time.

Shooting is floaty, with bullets lacking any kind of heft or impact. Loosing a clip of high-velocity ammo into another's face has no kinetic feedback, leaving firefights spectacularly unsatisfying. I also had to fight against mouse-hand conditioning: after a life of shooting game-guns, instinct took over as I repeatedly aimed for heads. No dice in *APB*, where the lack of location-specific damage means a bullet in the finger has the same effect as one in the brainstem. Realtime Worlds argues that this is to limit effectiveness of

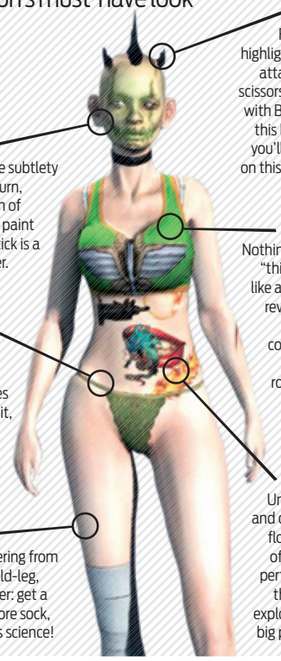
Art attack

APB's designer is easy to use, easy to love



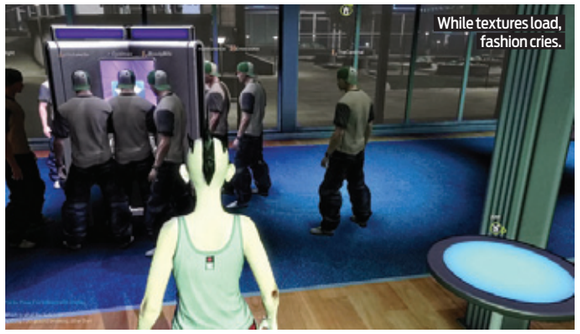
Hello gorgeous

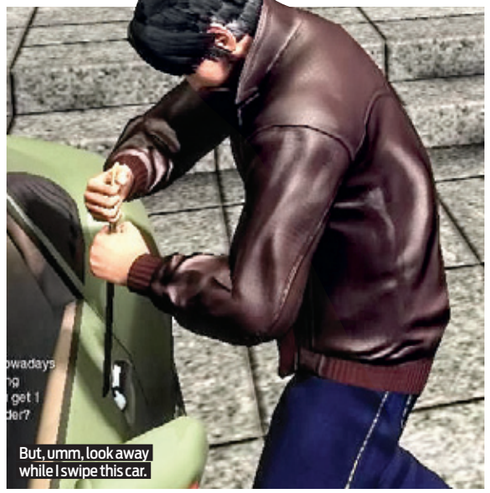
This season's must-have look

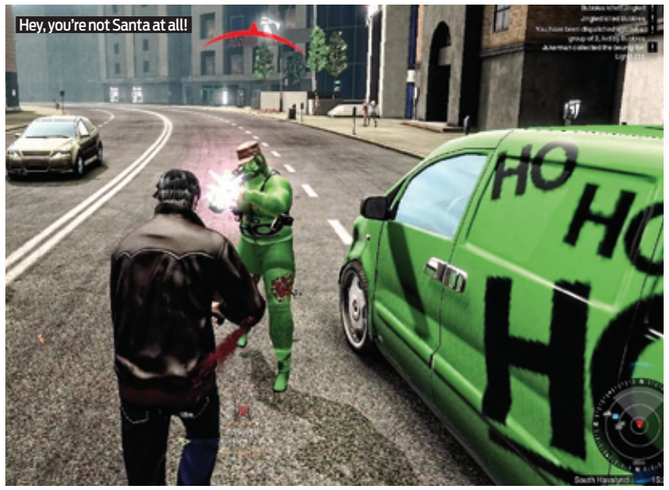










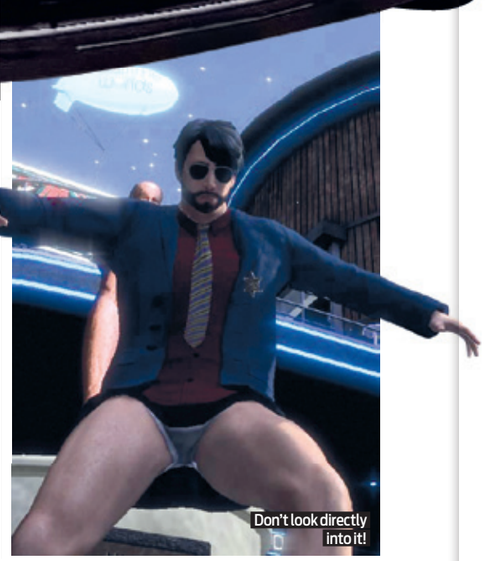



Impractical attire for driving a garbage truck.


Serves her right for lounging on my car.



Without a cover system, gunfights are imprecise.


Don't look directly into it!


Run away! Get shot! Repeat!



Such a colorful people, those San Paroites.

elite snipers against casual players. They've certainly done that, also by rendering the draw distance (even with the settings to max) at under 100 feet, but the decision to remove headshots feels more like a broken game than a design decision. *APB*'s gunplay is centrally unsatisfying: riddling a foe with buckshot should see him at least flinch, not steady his aim and peg you with shell after shell of assault rifle ammo. When so much of the game relies on these shooting battles, missions are greeted with creeping dread, not anticipation.

Like a box of crayons

It's not like the city itself takes your mind off the drudgery of your jobs. Uniformly dreary, San Paro is functional at best; at worst, it's boring, featureless slabs of concrete rising to form simple paths through leaden architecture. Strange thing is, San Paro's bleakness is completely at odds with the game's varied and powerful customization system.

Artistically inclined players can design clothes, adding decals and patterns to simple templates. There's an unfortunate leaning toward douche-baggery—the standard template for a player is a backwards-baseball capped frat boy—but the game's inhabitants have crafted some riotously colorful designs for both bodies and cars. These specks of absurdly excessive brightness stand out strongly against the bland city—when they pop into reality, it takes a while for the game's engine to spool up the textures for another player. At big gatherings of fellow players, many are stuck with the default rendering, and your gang ends up looking like the crowd at a Limp Bizkit reunion gig.

APB is a game hamstrung by ideas. There's just too many of them, clouding the field for new players. There's a basic rating, a score that goes up as you do more missions. Then there's a faction standing—complete a contact's missions, and you'll gain a better standing with their group. Kill more of your foes and die less as an Enforcer, and your prestige meter will rise. Slay more civilians as a criminal, and you'll increase your notoriety. Earn the top rank in either and you'll be highlighted for all and sundry to murder, a bounty on your head as you shed the normal ruleset that stops players killing those not involved in their mission. This short-term celebrity is fascinating in a design document; in the game, it means the players closest to the high-ranker take them out within seconds, defusing the idea of a server hero far too quickly.

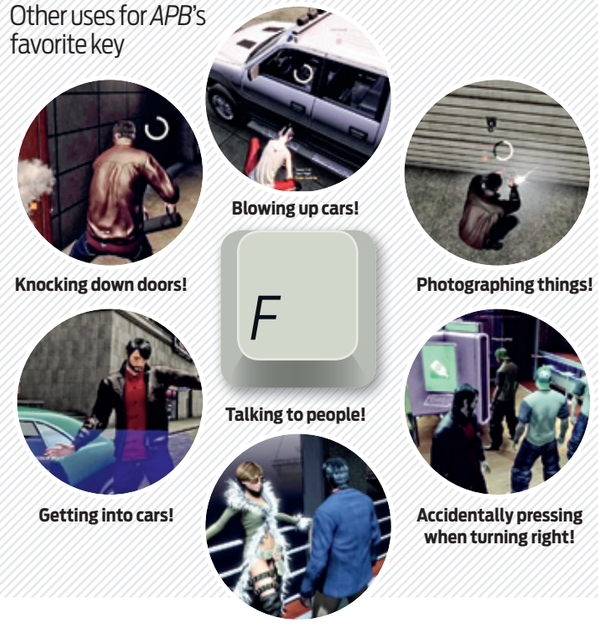
Lost in a strange city

Each extra layer of detail has been slapped on before the previous concept had time to solidify; explaining how it all interlocks is something the game's tutorial doesn't even attempt, quivering quietly at the reams of figures and scores and instead teaching you how to press F on stuff. Next to the D key, you say? Thanks, tutorial. The sheer amount of *stuff* is scary even to the seasoned veteran—after 20 hours, I still had no reference point for criminal skill levels, and couldn't predict what my Enforcer would be facing when starting a mission—there's zero chance on casual players picking up the nuances. We're left with a game that has structural problems at every strata, weaknesses that should've been refined and fixed rather than covered.

I came to realize those moments—the heart-thudding thrills I was treated to in the backs of cars, riding alongside fellow humans as we tailed other humans—came about not because of *APB*'s world, but despite it. Cramming people into a game-city and forcing them to fight will always provide instances of tension, drama and excitement, but I spent every fleeting second savoring those feelings while also cursing *APB*'s mechanics. In its current form, Realtime Worlds' take on the MMO is draining: beyond the end of my mission at hand, I had no desire to play the game a moment further than I had to. For a persistent online game, that's not a good sign. ■

You have to be F-ing kidding me

Other uses for *APB*'s favorite key



Knocking down doors!
Blowing up cars!
Photographing things!
Getting into cars!
Talking to people!
Accidentally pressing when turning right!

The game's inhabitants have already crafted some riotously colorful designs.

VERDICT

Confused and weightless, *APB* doesn't satisfy on any front: the shooting, driving, story and objectives are all average at best.

PC GAMER 62

◆ **Price** $50 for game + 50 hours of playtime. Sub either per hour or per month afterwards ◆ **Release** July 2
◆ **Publisher** Realtime Worlds/EA ◆ **Developer** Realtime Worlds ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** apb.com ◆ **ESRB** M

HIGH-POWERED

Keep your power-ups primed and throttle floored to **BLUR** your way to the front ***by Andy Mahood***

Need to know

What is it?
A licensed car racing free-for-all with power-up weaponry

Influenced by
Mario Kart; *Burnout*

Play it on
Dual-Core CPU, 3GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/ Radeon 4850

Alternatively
Split/Second (75%)

Copy protection
Disc check

When your resume includes the monstrously popular *Project Gotham Racing* series, driving game fans expect big things from you. Big, fast, shiny things. In keeping with that reputation, Liverpool-based Bizarre Creations delivers with the fittingly titled *Blur*; an arcade racer that unleashes speedy, *PGR*-style licensed cars onto a selection of exotic circuits and entices players to bash the living crap out of each other (or the AI) with a replenishable supply of power-ups.

Pulverize my ride

Bizarre must have a talented negotiator on the payroll to have convinced image-conscious car manufacturers to sign off on full, car-crushing damage modeling for the game's 50-plus recognizable vehicles—including notables like the Dodge Viper ACR, Renault Mégane Trophy and Audi R8. *Blur* shocks, blasts and smashes these machines at every turn (your car is restored to gleaming newness with a time penalty after a wreck), and from my first race on, the mayhem kept me enthralled.

Bizarre didn't code *Blur's* arcade driving physics—especially the difficult-to-execute drifting mechanics—at a terribly authentic level. Precision driving immediately took a back seat to efficient power-up harvesting; I raced my selected ride through the game's attractively rendered international venues, like the rollercoaster Hollywood hills and Barcelona's historic and challenging cobblestone streets, desperately seeking respawning power-ups to save my own skin or rip off that of my opponents.

The single-player game revolves around a nine-chapter opus of races, time-trials and destruction events where your heroics can earn "lights" and "fans" (replacing *PGR's* old kudos system) that unlock new vehicles, venues and AI bosses. I particularly liked the openness of the game's progress tree that lets you replay past events with faster, newly acquired cars.

When it works, the 20-person multiplayer operates seamlessly, though the game's online headcount was surprisingly thin shortly after release. To add to my loneliness, *Blur* doesn't support any sort of in-game chat. Fortunately, there's the two to four-player splitscreen mode.

Blurred vision

Released simultaneously for the Xbox 360 and PS3, *Blur's* PC edition seems hastily cobbled-together in some spots. The graphics are pleasing enough and run smoothly, but the visuals just don't impress next to other recent games. You can also set aside that expensive racing wheel, because *Blur's* limited controller support rebuffs almost everything except an Xbox 360 gamepad. The game's MIA cockpit view, mouseless GUI screens and fixed key bindings add further angst to PC racers.

Regardless, *Blur* remains a thoroughly enjoyable and addictive combat racer that challenges gamers to develop a heavily caffeinated level of situational awareness. Avoiding hazards like lightning domes, homing missiles and opponent-deployed mines as you struggle to repair and shield your car—while also returning fire—can be tremendously satisfying, and the game nails these elements. A well-engineered system of rewards and unlockables (in both MP and single-player) adds truckloads of replayability.

Those Bizarre Creations folks seem to have a knack for this kind of stuff. ■

Blur Power-up Primer



Barge A close-range radial pulse attack that blasts nearby vehicles away from you.



Bolt Fires three energy rounds (fore or aft) to nudge your opponent off-course.



Mine Drop one behind to mess up a pursuer's day. You can also fling it forward for similar results.



Nitro Gives your car a burst of acceleration. Can also be fired in reverse to provide super-braking.



Repair Self-explanatory. Much faster than any mortal NASCAR pit crew.



Shield Like insurance, protects you from all attacks and collisions for a short period of time.



Shock Fires three lightning domes to the front of the pack that slow down cars driving through them.



Shunt A powerful homing missile that flips cars into the air. Works forward and backward.

VERDICT

PC optimization issues and lack of peripheral support aside, *Blur* is the sweetest car combat game in years.

PC GAMER **78**

From my very first race on, the mayhem kept me enthralled.

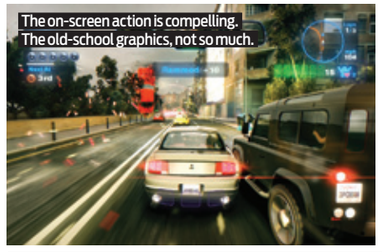
◆ **Price** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Activision ◆ **Developer** Bizarre Creations
◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 20 players online; 2 to 4-player splitscreen ◆ **Link** blurgame.com ◆ **ESRB** E



I broke it, you've bought it.


Inventive racing locales—like Britain's Brighton beach—add a worldly flair.


Blur's varied stable of licensed cars is quite impressive.


The on-screen action is compelling. The old-school graphics, not so much.


The "shock" power-up fires car-arresting lightning domes ahead.


There's no replay screen, but you can pause the action to take snapshots.



Nitro boosts can really motivate your ride on the straights.

DEFENSIVE

The mod that created a genre casts a long shadow across **HEROES OF NEWERTH**'s fantasy battlegrounds ***by Jim Rossignol***

Need to know

What is it?
Competitive Fantasy multiplayer based around the tower defense variant mod *Defense of the Ancients*

Influenced by
Defense of the Ancients

Play it on
2GHz Dual Core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 7800/Radeon X1900

Alternatively
Demigod, 81%

Copy protection
Online play only

S2 makes no bones about it: this game is designed to replace classic *Warcraft III* mod *Defense of the Ancients*, modernizing it for the same dedicated community. At the time of writing, *Heroes of Newerth* is in the late stages of "open beta" and has been proclaimed ripe for review by its developer. Even now it's already enormously popular—one of the great communities of PC gaming.

Ready and waiting

Just as in any tower defense game, there are towers and creeps—the mobs of AI-controlled beasties that march in waves across each map—but rather than placing additional towers, you take the mantle of one of 62 fantasy heroes to fight both creeps and other players.

Your hero gains experience and levels up by killing creeps—which are released from the bases of both teams with increasing abundance as the game progresses—and other heroes. However, to get XP in the amounts you need to stay competitive, you have to master "last-hitting," which means landing the killing blow on a creep and thus earning the XP. This is one of those unwritten skills the game requires you to perfect without really explaining why. It's probably the first clue you'll get as to *HoN*'s high skill requirements.

The second clue is in the shop. Your hero has four innate powers which level up as you play—standard RPG type stuff. The shop, however, offers dozens more items that you can fit into six slots in your inventory to enhance your abilities. Every item consists of multiple ingredients, each of which must be purchased to create any given item. It seems like a bizarrely arbitrary extra layer of detail I could've done without.

Going public

Learning these complexities in public means braving *HoN*'s judgmental community. Servers are divided with "noob" and pro labels, but joining an appropriate server doesn't guarantee a friendly game. You can expect to be ruthlessly booted if your skills don't measure up. You're better off working out an effective build by reading some online guides.

HoN is only at its strongest when people are playing organized matches of roughly similar-skilled players—a rare occurrence—and nothing less is acceptable to many players. More often than not, either someone will quit early and skew the game, or one team angrily concedes before the match is really decided.

There are some other wider issues for general play, too. One is the speed with which many of the skills can be executed—being ganked (that is, killed without any real recourse for defense or escape) is all too easy, particularly if you've lagged a couple of levels behind. The fact that defeated heroes lose gold and their enemy gains it on each kill can quickly skew things in favor of one side, causing a failure cascade and a collapse of one side. A secondary punishment of extended respawn times for the killed player only compounds what is ultimately an unfair design.

That's not to say the game doesn't look good against its peers—*League of Legends*, *Demigod* and the original *Defense of the Ancients*. There's something complex and difficult here that will—and clearly does—reward persistence and skill. Nevertheless, the combination of unpleasant individuals and the overall lack of reward in the game itself leaves me cold and unmotivated to go back and refine my skills. Popular as it may be, I just can't recommend the experience for new players. ■

Learning in public means braving *HoN*'s judgemental community.

The archetypes

Three ways to be a hero



Intelligence
Intelligence characters are relatively weak, but their spell powers are formidable. If you want high-end magical attacks, look to these guys for your choice.

Strength
Strength heroes are the classic strong-but-slow character, but in *HoN* they take on many forms. They can take lots of damage, but also dish it out at close range.

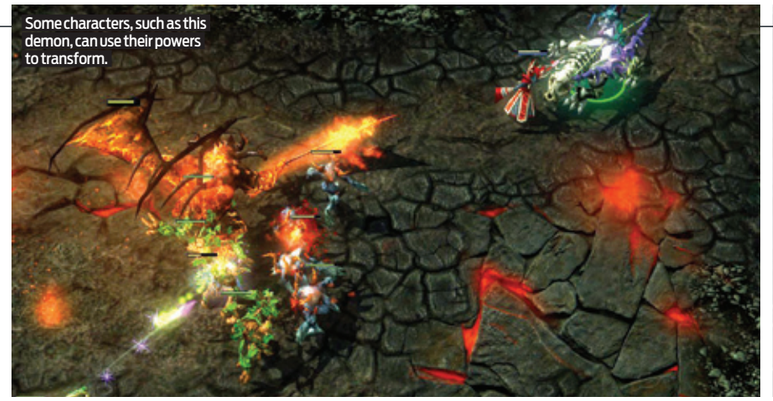
Agility
Agility heroes are speedy and usually big damage-dealers. They'll often have good long-range attacks, too. They will, of course, be lightly armored and vulnerable.

◆ **Expect to pay** $30 ◆ **Release** out now ◆ **Publisher** S2 Games ◆ **Developer** S2 Games
◆ **Multiplayer** 2-10 players, LAN, internet ◆ **Link** heroesofnewerth.com ◆ **ESRB** NR

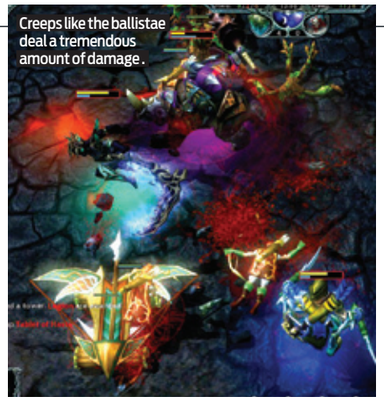
VERDICT

A brutal design and an unfriendly community create difficult barriers to entry for all but the most seasoned players.

PC GAMER **71**



Some characters, such as this demon, can use their powers to transform.



Creeps like the ballistae deal a tremendous amount of damage.



Defeat is not far away for the Hellborne side in this situation.



If the Legion loses the tree of life, it's over.



Towers provide powerful backup in a fight.

BACK IN THE SANDALS

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE FORGOTTEN SANDS forgets the reboot and returns the Prince to his death-defying gymnastic roots ***by Norman Chan***

Need to know

What is it?
Third-person action platformer with environmental puzzles

Influenced by
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

Play it on
2.6GHz GPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 9800GTX/Radeon 4870

Alternatively
Prince of Persia (78%)

Copy protection
Requires constant internet connection

There's a disconcerting sense of déjà vu that blankets *The Forgotten Sands*. It's not that this latest *Prince of Persia* evokes the marketing surge for Disney's just-released *Prince of Persia* movie—Ubisoft is quick to point out that this is *not* a movie tie-in. And it can't be that the game is too similar to the Prince's last outing, because this actually isn't a sequel to the 2008 franchise reboot. In fact, this story is a return to the *Sands of Time* trilogy, taking place between *Sands of Time* and *Warrior Within*.

Obstacle course

And that's where we've played this before. *Forgotten Sands* feels familiar because it relies so heavily on the series' time-tested platforming mechanics. Once I learned the basic wall-scaling, pillar-climbing and pole-swinging moves, there weren't any new surprises. Every level and puzzle is designed to make use of a mix of those core skills. In that regard, the *Forgotten Sands* is a technical exercise. Halfway through the game, I'd already forgotten about the story—the Prince and his brother are fighting to banish an undead army they accidentally unleashed, yada yada yada—and focused on how each new room I entered would challenge my ability to time-leap between pillars with architecturally unsound hanging axes that swung in my path. I stopped seeing environments; I saw only linear obstacle courses. It just so happens that I enjoy this kind of platformer, but it's not going to blow your mind with originality or immersion.

While the platform puzzles are never difficult to the point of frustration, the way each successive room requires you to leverage acrobatic feats in increasingly challenging scenarios is reminiscent of *Portal*'s level progression. The first part of the game trains you to recognize visual cues—protruding stones are meant for climbing while hanging banners are used to safely descend to the ground, etc.—so that you spend less time *thinking* about how to get from point A to point B and more time *executing* the perfectly timed acrobatics.

For example, after I acquired the special power to temporarily turn water fountains into solid columns, a puzzle required activating that ability to swing across a chasm, deactivating it *mid-jump* to splash through a wall of water, and then reactivating it again just in the nick of time to grab on to another frozen water stream. This kind of precise platforming is very satisfying in the later stages, where the massive and complex level-puzzles give little room for hesitation (even though you can always rewind time if you make a mistake). It's also why playing with a gamepad is recommended—I had problems keeping track of what buttons to hold and which to let go of on a keyboard in the more complex sequences.

Mash and slash

When I wasn't vaulting over spiked pits or scaling the gears of a colossal astrolabe, I was on the ground, swiping my sword at hordes of zombie soldiers. The fighting is reduced to shallow and furious button-mashing—no blocks or parries here. A power skill tree unlocks four combat abilities, but the only one I found useful was a stone shield that grants brief invulnerability—very useful for defeating mini-bosses. What the game lacks in refined combat it makes up for in numbers—fighting up to 50 enemies at once is a sight to behold, even if I never felt overwhelmed because of how easy these grunts are to kill.

Despite throwing all of these death-traps and more at the Prince, *The Forgotten Sands* plays it relatively safe. It'll pose you a solid couple of days' worth of platforming challenge, but is ultimately a forgettable experience. ■

I stopped seeing environments; I saw only linear obstacle courses.

The Powers of Persia

The Prince's abilities game to game are fickle as his facial hair

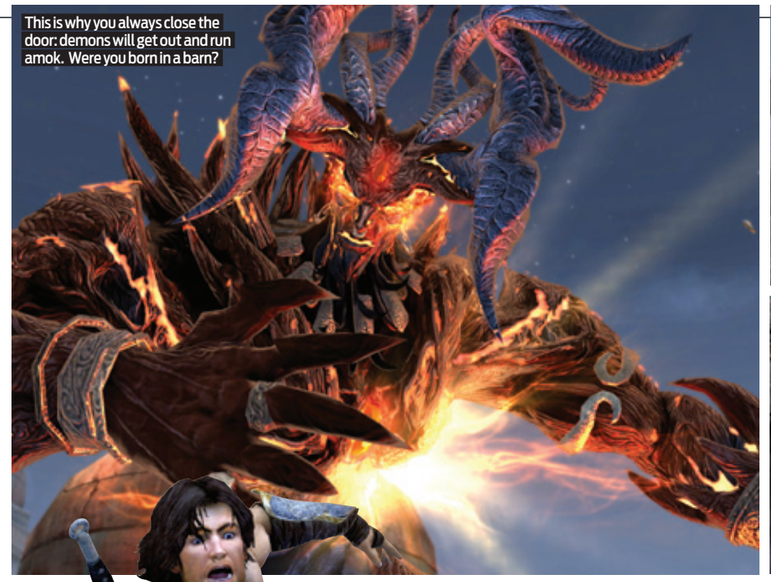
	The Sands of Time	Warrior Within	The Two Thrones	The Forgotten Sands
Reverse Time	✓	✓	✓	✓
Slow Time	✓	✓	✓	
Freeze Time	✓			
Dual-Wield		✓	✓	
Fire Power				✓
Wind Power		✓	✓	✓
Sand Power		✓	✓	✓
Freeze fountains, rebuild pillars				✓

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** prince-of-persia.us.ubi.com ◆ **ESRB** T

VERDICT

Button-mashing combat and new powers aren't particularly inspired, but the platforming puzzles progressively challenging.

PC GAMER **74**


This is why you always close the door: demons will get out and run amok. Were you born in a barn?


This old Prince doesn't learn many new tricks.


By not using dryer sheets in the wash, the Prince is able to cling to fabric like glue.


"NOOOOOO! Don't buy a ticket to the *Prince of Persia* movie!"


Fighting doesn't take much skill, but it puts on a good show.


Think you brought enough zombies?


Turning invulnerable when he's about to strike makes this guy a pushover.


Ah, isometric view. That takes me back...



How did it know my physique? Creepy.


Instead of dwarves and elves, there are lizardmen and cat-people.


I highly recommend trying out the shareware version before you buy.


I love old-school, but a button to highlight dropped items would've been handy.

THE LAST CRAWL

It may not look like much, but **AVERNUM 6** is a quest down memory lane ***by Desslock***

Need to know

What is it?
An old-school dungeon-crawling RPG

Influenced by
The *Ultima* series

Play it on
1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, integrated graphics

Alternatively
Fallout (90%)

Copy protection
None

For more than 15 years, Jeff Vogel's Spiderweb Software has produced RPGs that are so low-budget and old-school in their sensibilities that they best resemble genre classics from around 1990. In fact, the isometric graphics in *Avernum 6* arguably don't surpass those of *Ultima VI*, a game which heavily influenced early Spiderweb releases. But antiquated tech doesn't prevent *Avernum 6* from delivering an enormous RPG loaded with addictive gameplay and a storyline that effectively wraps up the tale that *Avernum* has been weaving since its inception.

A peaceful new equilibrium has been established between the subterranean society of Avernum and the inhabitants of the aptly named Empire, whose citizens now regard Avernum as an exotic destination for adventure. But after the fungi food supply is endangered by disease, and savage lizardfolk appear to be massing for conquest, much of the underground populace attempts to flee through the sole surface portal to avoid starvation or hearing the lamentation of their women. As a neophyte soldier in Avernum's service, you're obliged to quell the chaos and unveil the forces instigating the bedlam. The lighthearted dialogue and simple confrontations at the game's outset are impressively supplanted through increased gravitas and large-scale battles as the story progresses. Collectively, the mixture of tones provide a satisfying resolution to the series.

Feed me

Constrained by both budget limitations and design, *Avernum 6* is obstinately old-school in its genre conventions. Combat is turn-based, the perspective is isometric, graphics are largely recycled from previous installments and you need to keep your party well fed. Individual conversations are terse, but the game is massive, so there are a ton of characters and many of them are given distinctive personalities and quirks. The size of the world also makes exploration rewarding; as you gradually unveil the map, you'll find plenty of lairs, settlements and loot.

Gameplay is simple but addictive, as new spells and abilities are doled out and fresh menaces arrive at a compelling pace. I got a lot of satisfaction by carpet-sweeping the map to uncover and clean-out new areas. As such, you can enjoy even brief gaming sessions, but you're consistently tempted to prolong the session to see "just one more" territory.

As much as I love the classic RPGs of old, *Avernum 6* surpasses them in sophistication and scale, even if its modest production values give it more in common with iPhone games than *Fallout 3*. It's the genre flagbearer for offering substance over flash, and it's an epic finale for a series that deserves respect. ■

VERDICT

An epic conclusion to an old-school RPG tale. It may have 90s graphics, but *Avernum 6* is more than a nostalgic lark.

PC GAMER **73**

◆ **Price** $28 (*Avernum* 4-6 package for $55) ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Spiderweb ◆ **Developer** Spiderweb ◆ **Multiplayer** No ◆ **Link** avernum.com ◆ **ESRB** NR


"It's okay—you only hurt my face."

PAROLED

Do hard time in **PRISON BREAK: THE CONSPIRACY** ***by Chris Comiskey***

With a box that proudly boasts the participation of the cast of the 2005 to 2009 TV show *Prison Break*, it's rather tragic that you'll only hear from them in *Prison Break: The Conspiracy* for as long as it takes them to eat a bowl of cereal. Still, for what little the thespians remark, their comments are at least phoned-in with mild enthusiasm—a step up from the typical abysmally acted gaming tie-ins.

Filling the tank top and armhanky-clad third-person torso of covert Company agent Tom Paxton, your job is to infiltrate the Fox River Penitentiary to observe and report on the behavior of the show's main characters, inmates Burrows and Scofield.

You're almost immediately grabbed and incapacitated by a random convict's sweaty mitts. This is your very first "hi there!" to the thankfully limited quick-time event system. You've got about one paltry second to mash each sequential correct key to escape, or you're dead before you even start the game. Not the best first impression.

The numerous fist-fights and sneaking excursions fair far better. Serving up hot knuckle-sandwiches to inmates is simplistic, but grin-inducing. Making contact with a well-timed haymaker is a sensation that never, ever grows stale.

As the stealth gameplay goes, Paxton ain't exactly Sam Fisher's master protégé. If you're spotted even in the *slightest*, it's game over. Try again. Luckily, the checkpoint saves are well-placed and updated frequently. You'll rarely have to repeat an impossibly long prowling area, with the one exception of the sanity-crushing endgame portion. There're no secret areas, complex guard-evasion maneuvers, combat after discoveries or alternative paths to victory. In fact, *Prison Break* is really just a cleverly disguised 3D side-scrolling sneaker, with fairly respectable graphics and fights tossed in for extra flavor. And know what? That's *okay*. Linear games can be enjoyed.

For the 10 or so hours spent skulking behind bars, *Prison Break* fans will adore the atmosphere and ridiculously outlandish plot elements. For folks unfamiliar with the TV series, wondering if this thing's really worth $30, well, you could do a lot worse. ■

PC GAMER **60**

◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Deep Silver ◆ **Developer** Zootfly ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** prisonbreak.deepsilver.com ◆ **ESRB** T

EASTERN PROMISE

New lands and high-level thrills enrich the world of
AGE OF CONAN: RISE OF THE GODSLAYER *by Tom Senior*

Need to know

What is it?
An Asian-themed expansion to the MMO based on the world of barbarian adventurer Conan

Influenced by
The writings of Robert E. Howard

Play it on
Dual-Core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800 GT/ Radeon 4850

Alternatively
World of Warcraft (91%)

Copy protection
Subscription

With its powerful character classes, offline leveling and emphasis on PvE, *Age of Conan* has made a niche for itself among casual solo players. Those players will love *Rise of the Godslayer*, which doesn't tinker with the PvP side of things at all. Instead, it adds five new quest-filled areas based on the realm of Khitai, *Conan* creator Robert E. Howard's take on East Asia, *AoC* now feels more like a single-player RPG than it ever has before.

The Gateway to Khitai is set aside for level 20-40 play, adding some much-needed substance to the middle game with the dead rising and a race of irritating ape men running amok. The wide-open areas, with their abandoned crypts and ancient ruins, provide plenty of adventure, but the Gateway is easily the weakest zone of the five, lacking the dungeons and the spectacular sights of the diverse level 80 areas that lie just beyond the iron-clad Gates of Khitai.

Free-for-all

It's a land marred by conflict, with 10 new factions at war in every corner of the country. You can pledge allegiance to these factions, eventually earning serious rewards in the form of stunning armor sets and an epic mount.

Getting one of those mounts is one of the best quests in the game. Gain enough favor with Tamarin's Tigers and you'll have the opportunity to steal a tiger cub. Like real cats, they're hard to impress, so you'll need to strip naked and beat a tigress to death with your bare hands, train your cub to fight for you, then craft a saddle to turn your war beast into a truly impressive mount. It's a difficult and lengthy task that turns the best rewards in the game into something more than just another loot drop.

Inevitably, not all the missions are this good. There are a few dull killing and collection tasks, but *RotG*'s great success lies in creating a world that never feels like a quest factory. For example, in one area torn apart by the war between local factions you'll be taking on quests aiding the faction of your choice, but you can also help the innocent peasants caught up in the crossfire, searching for lost loved ones and helping the wounded.

Warband

Fortunately, there're still plenty of ways for groups to test their mettle across the 13 new, inventive dungeons scattered through the high-level lands. The most challenging lies at the base of the vast, ominous crater that scars the northern land of Kara Korum, where the tier 4 Jade Citadel raids pit you and an army of friends against the Emperor's forces. You'll need military-grade organization and help from the handy new alternative advancement system (which enhances your best skills and lets casual players keep up with their friends) to stand a chance.

There are still parts of the core game that need reworking, of course. Veteran players will be disappointed that the starting area of Tortage remains unchanged, with only slight differences if you start as a Khitan character. Some uninspired writing and mannequin-like NPCs threaten to undermine the drama of your undertakings, and PvP enthusiasts, served so well by many of the free updates, will find nothing in the expansion beyond the extra skills.

Overall, though, there's a sense that *Rise of the Godslayer* is exactly what *Age of Conan* needed. Players with lapsed high-level characters will be well-rewarded should they return, and there's never been a better time for new players to grab a battle-axe and take the plunge. ■

With friends like these...

Meet three of the many mad factions of Khitai



The Shadows of Jade
Stealthy and competent assassins, the SoJ live in jungle tree houses like awesome ninja hippies.



Priests of Yog-Kosha
They travel the land doing good deeds, but their friendly elephant god has mysteriously disappeared.



Tamarin's Tigers
So much as look at them the wrong way and they'll break out the cooking pots, but their friends get to ride tigers.

You'll need to strip naked and beat a tigress to death with your bare hands.

VERDICT

A mammoth update that caters for mid-to high-level players. Memorable new lands and quests make up for the lack of new PvP.

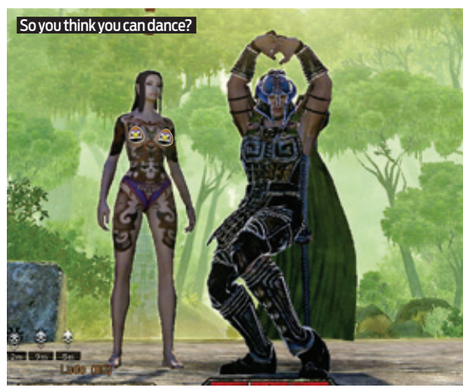
PC GAMER **80**

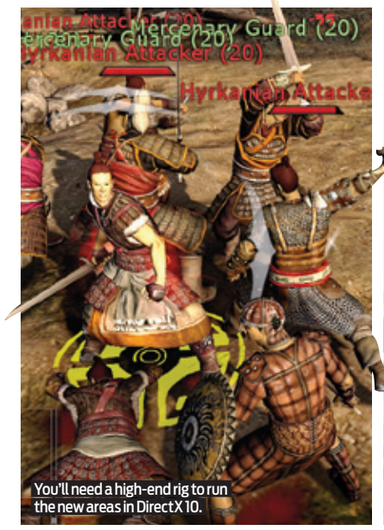
◆ **Price** $30 (includes original *Age of Conan*) ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Funcom ◆ **Developer** Funcom ◆ **Multiplayer** Massively ◆ **Link** bit.ly/C35Lu ◆ **ESRB** M


Khitai: not a cuddly place.


"Monkey Island" doesn't mean quite the same thing here.


"This...this is really going to hurt, isn't it?"


So you think you can dance?



You'll need a high-end rig to run the new areas in DirectX 10.


There's a wolf mount too, but the tiger looks much better.



Oh yeah, hot blimp-on-blimp action!


Mr. Fixit jumps into action to repair a burning engine.


Enemies will always keep their distance, so fire at the specks.

CRASH AND BURN

Unlike its mythological namesake, **GUNS OF ICARUS** doesn't fly anywhere near the sun ***by Daniel Shannon***

Need to know

What is it?
A four-player shooting gallery set on a post-apocalyptic dirigible

Influenced by
Beachhead 2000, *Crimson Skies*

Play it on
2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, GeForce 7600GT/Radeon X800

Alternatively
Air Buccaneers (UT2004 mod)

Copy protection
Steam

As a gnomish gunner-slash-mechanic on an autopiloted, steam-powered dirigible, *Guns of Icarus* demands that you defend your lumbering airship from the ever-present scourge of air pirates. The airborne steampunk setting evokes memories of Disney's *TaleSpin* (minus the pantsless bear pilot), but there is very little derring-do or high adventure to be found here—only repetitive, on-rails turret gunning smothered in existential angst.

Combat engineer

In between the protagonist's lamentations about how God no longer listens to him, you'll scurry around the ship, firing mounted guns at incoming pirates and fixing critical ship components with your trusty wrench. Keeping your engines and cargo bay intact while you're fighting off a swarm of (roughly) a bazillion pirates can be maddeningly difficult.

Even when you achieve a balance between shooting and repair, there's not enough to the gameplay to keep it fresh very long. Sadly, your reward for completing the extremely short campaign is a suicide run that tests how long you can last against endless waves of pirates, which strips away any meaning from the story. You don't even go out with much of a bang, as the weapons you earn are limited to an uninspired arsenal of flak cannons, miniguns, rocket launchers and lightning rays.

Sky mutes

Things pick up a little in the multiplayer — where up to four players share the airship's shooting and fixing duties — but it's just as beset by problems and missed opportunities as it is by air pirates. For starters, you don't get to customize your ship's weaponry like you do in the campaign. Furthermore, there's no means of communicating with your teammates—no voice, no functional text chat—and coupled with the lack of any on-screen indication when a ship component is being repaired, this makes co-op coordination nearly impossible. In one match, I responded to the flames erupting from the right engine, jumping off the starboard minigun to conduct repairs…only to meet all three teammates there, with no one left to man the guns. Naturally, the pirates took that opportunity to destroy our rigging, sending us all to a fiery death. And that was one of the few occasions when I was actually able to find three other people playing to not coordinate with.

Guns of Icarus is plagued by lowrent graphics and a single musical track that repeats endlessly, but what is unforgivable is asking $10 for a game that's only marginally better than the version you can play for free at Musegames.com. Don't go down with this ship. ■

VERDICT

Repetitive gameplay and an inability to communicate with your co-op teammates will keep *Guns of Icarus* grounded.

PC GAMER **44**

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Muse Games ◆ **Developer** Muse Games ◆ **Multiplayer** 4-player co-op ◆ **Link** musegames.com/games/guns-of-icarus ◆ **ESRB** NR


It's Little Arctic Circle. That's a good joke!

ACCURSED

SAM & MAX warmly invite you to **THE TOMB OF SAMMUN-MAK** ***by John Walker***

Meddling with timelines is too rarely done in gaming. So it's a great pleasure that this second episode of the third season of *Sam & Max*'s mini-adventures, *The Tomb of Sammun-Mak*, does such a great job of this. It's a shame that not nearly so great a job is done on making the puzzles entertaining.

At the end of the first episode, the freelance cops found what appeared to be the skeletal remains of themselves, with Sam seemingly throttling Max. Reels of film nearby suggest that these are in fact the pair's own grandfathers, and the story of how they came to be quite so skinny is contained with the footage. Max's new psychic powers mean that viewing the reels is to interact with them, so you play as Sameth and Maximus, in an early 20th-century New York setting.

It's a peculiar story, ultimately about recovering the season's arc item, the Devil's Toybox, and featuring season two characters Nicholas St. Kringle and his elf slaves, as well as mole people with the ability to cast magical curses.


Ventriloquism is never OK.

The game throws many puzzles at you, but rarely gives you any sense of satisfaction when solving them. It's like chipping away at a mountain with a toothpick; each puzzle is replaced with another, rather than giving any notion of progression. And all too often the solution is just to use one of Max's two powers: shrinking or ventriloquism.

There are some brilliant jokes, but too much of this episode is spent running into walls, of both the figurative and literal varieties, when using the awful new controls to navigate the tight corridors of a train.

This outing is better than previous seasons, but far weaker than episode one. ■

PC GAMER **74**

◆ **Price** $35 for all five episodes ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Telltale ◆ **Developer** Telltale ◆ **Multiplayer** No ◆ **Link** telltalegames.com ◆ **ESRB** E



You know what'd look cool in this spot? A giant golden statue of myself.

TOTALITARIANI-SIM

First you get the **TROPICO 3: ABSOLUTE POWER**, then you get the wind farms *by Evan Lahti*

Safely out of view of my garbage dump, arms factory and communist army base, I'm building a hot air balloon launching pad on the beach. The boatload of tourists being ferried to my island, Hedontopia, are gonna love it. The joys of being a dictator haven't changed in *Absolute Power*—nor has the franchise's charming parody of Latin American nation-building. It's the Cold War—a period of deep conflict between the United States and the USSR. And one you can profit tremendously from.

Absolute Power's enhancements mostly take the form of new content: a fresh, 10-mission campaign adds playful, hilarious objectives (like dealing with rifts in the space-time continuum, or convincing one of your factions to believe in Chupacabra, a legendary demon) that do a better job of buying into the comedy of the game than say, exporting fruit. This is exactly the kind of playfulness I expect from *Tropico*—it may be a city sim, but it's never been about building by the book. The bulk of the fun lies in racketeering your way to wealth by luring tourists to your island paradise and watching your Swiss bank account swell.

Ten new hilarious "Megalomaniac" edicts are a great example of that fun manipulation. They include the ability to print money on a whim (which creates a magical $20,000 cash at the cost of inflation), assassinating the annoying radio DJ that chatters on about your actions, wholesale elimination of one of your island's factions or forcing the TV station to create a reality show about you (a nod to Kalypso's other game, *M.U.D. TV*).

If you're new to the series, *Absolute Power* rebuilds the main game's lackluster tutorial, too. My main gripe is that there isn't any unconventional new gameplay mode—competing in an arms race for nuclear proliferation with a neighboring nation might've been a fun diversion, for example.

Absolute Power is a collection of small, but welcome enhancements—a splash of new content that doesn't change what the game is, but enough that anyone still investing hours in the perfect republic will love. ■

PC GAMER **79**

◆ **Price** $20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Kalypso ◆ **Developer** Haemimont ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** tropico3.com ◆ **ESRB** T

PC GAMER

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalizing the review. We review each game on its own merits and match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The primary aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review paid-for content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice, even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
A glowing example within its genre of excellence in design and execution.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

A game scoring 80% or more is eligible to receive the PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

PC Gamer's 10 Latest and Greatest

Sleep is Death (90%)
July '10

Love (86%)
July '10

Dawn of War II: Chaos Rising (91%)
May '10

Mass Effect 2 (90%)
March '10

BioShock 2 (90%)
March '10

Left 4 Dead 2 (92%)
January '10

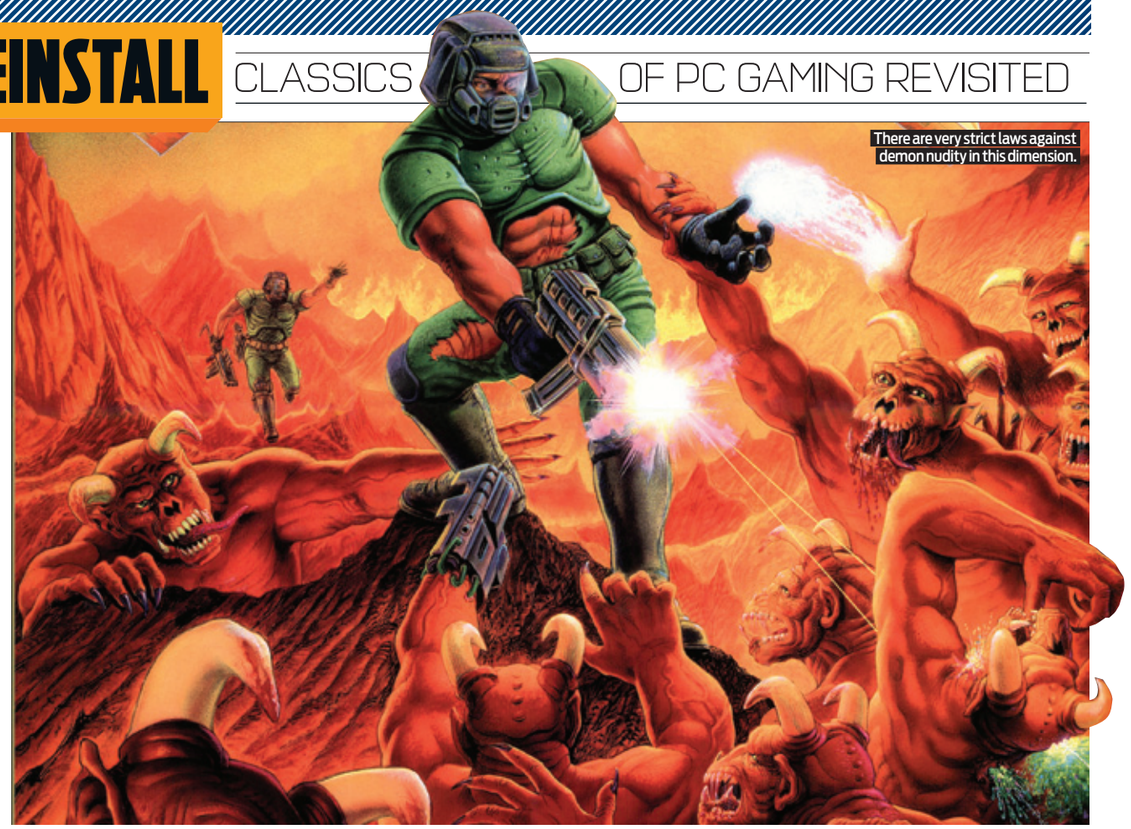
Dragon Age: Origins (92%)
Holiday '09

Batman: Arkham Asylum (93%)
December '09

Resident Evil 5 (93%)
November '09

Streetfighter IV (92%)
October '09

REINSTALL CLASSICS OF PC GAMING REVISITED


There are very strict laws against demon nudity in this dimension.

Classic Game Club

GRABBING KEYCARDS AND BLASTING SATAN'S SONS WITH OUR CHAINGUNS IN **DOOM**

READ ME

RELEASE DATE
December 10, 1993

PUBLISHER
id Software/GT Interactive

WHAT WE SAID THEN
We didn't. *Doom*'s original release predates *PC Gamer* by just a few months.

REQUIRES
Keyboard

WE RECOMMEND
Final Doom, $9.99, Steam; *Doom II*, $9.99, Steam

Evan: *Doom* is an engine of raw, gory feedback between your weapons and hell's multicolored zoo. My favorite trivia about the game—and I think it's emblematic of the brilliance of lead programmer John Carmack—is that every enemy in *Doom* has a "pain" sprite and sound effect, a frame of animation that has a chance to be triggered whenever you shoot them. Within those static-seeming, sprites (the globular Cacodemon is my favorite) were small expressions of terror and emotion. I like knowing that.

Robert: *Doom* was one of my first social gaming experiences. I think a lot of people played it the same way I did: "keyboard co-op," splitting the two axes of movement with a friend or a parent and rolling through hell in conjoined twin mode. It worked remarkably well when we agreed on which way to go. It converted *Doom* into a vehicle game with a turret, and converted our minds into bloodlusting husks. It's still the pioneer of gore and violence, to me.

Logan: Replaying it today—I'm not proud to admit this—but I couldn't deal without mouse control. Once I switched to the mouse-control version, though, it was like make-up sex. Not all games return the instant thrill you experienced the first time so many years later (see last month's Game Club on *Out of This World*), but *Doom* did. I worked up a sweat in the first 20 minutes. And my reunion with the Arch-vile made me feel like I was passing kidney stones.

The recoil animation of the shotgun is still one of the best-feeling trigger-pulls in a shooter.

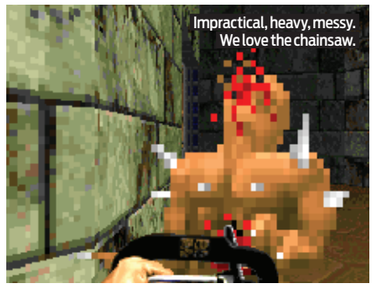
Erik: Not me. I remember playing *Doom* and being utterly bored as a child. The rocket launcher felt nothing like a rocket launcher, and the enemies exploded identically however you shot them. Booting it up now, it's the exact same feeling: you hold down Alt and Shift to move left and right and jab Ctrl until the bad guys die.

Evan: But that simplicity that you're talking about—no reloads, no vertical aiming, no jump button, no crouch—I think it's a reminder of how much space stuff like cover systems, squad management, and even co-op have put between us and the pure, direct feedback of turning zombie marines into piles of pixels. There's something to be said for instant gratification.

Logan: It seems hilarious that *Doom*'s paleolithic graphics and goofy monsters would arouse so much social hysteria, but now, years later, I kind of get it. I mean, it was a huge leap from the side-scrollers of the time and the abstracted violence of arcade games. I'm not saying the hysteria was justified, but I can see why it freaked people out.

Evan: The presentation is classic. Every demon shriek (it was also one of the first first-person games to use stereo sound) evokes more tension than it should; the textures hold up better than *Hexen* or *Rise of the Triad*.


A Cacodemon. From the original *Doom* manual: "They float in the air, belch ball-lightning and boast one hell of a big mouth."


Impractical, heavy, messy. We love the chainsaw.


"My blood! You shot out all of my blood!

Robert: It's definitely a game driven by pure feedback. That precious second-and-a-half of time you have to bob and dodge between the recoil animation of the shotgun is still one of the best-feeling trigger-pulls in a shooter. Melting a roomful of former humans with the BFG 9000 is still the best overkill moment in gaming.

Evan: Nightmare mode is the only way to replay it, I think. When you select it, *Doom* asks: "Are you sure? This skill level isn't even remotely fair." I miss prompts like that—it's so easy to forget that *Doom* was an indie game, and one of the rare moments in PC history where that era's best talent created something purely violent, visceral and unspoiled by marketing.


"Is it dead?"
"Yeah, I think so...kick it."
"You kick it. I'm not touch'n it."


He died with his boots on—that's all a Former Human can hope for.





1 Left 4tress

MAP PLAY *TEAM FORTRESS 2*'S **BADWATER BASIN** IN *LEFT 4 DEAD 2*

Mash-ups are great, as proven here by the marrying of the grim world of *Left 4 Dead 2* and the cartoon backdrop of *Team Fortress 2*. Why, it's almost as good as Lady Gaga and The Beach Boys (*bit.ly/bN7FdY*).



The *Left 4 Dead 2* survivors have somehow found their way into Badwater Basin, the best *Team Fortress 2* Payload map. But the whole concept of the map has been tweaked to fit *L4D2*: this is not just new scenery. The cart the blue team has to push in the original game still works, but this time in order to move it the survivors must fill it with fuel from tanks strewn around the level. It also carries melee weapons for the survivors to beat up the zombie population with, but ammo and health are no longer dispensed. You collect these as you go.

It's a great concept for a *Left 4 Dead 2* map, but it just happens to be in another game's universe. The zombies make good use of Badwater's open design: the wide spaces, particularly at the start where the cart travels through a tunnel underneath a huge expanse of dusty red hillside. The zombies can run into either end of the tunnel, and your fuel will run out halfway if you don't keep feeding the delicious petroleum pick-me-ups into the cart's insatiable maw.

The required tactics aren't unlike those in *Left 4 Dead 2*'s existing multiplayer fill-'em-up mode, Scavenge. To keep the cart moving, decisions need to be made between the survivors: who stays to pour, and who goes to fight (the AI doesn't understand the concept of cart-pushing, so play with humans).

The divergent pathway is better attacked as a group, as the cart wanders further from fuel sources than you'd usually be comfortable with in *Left 4 Dead*. Yet generally Badwater, and *Team Fortress 2* maps in general, are less snaky than *Left 4 Dead*'s.

This has been designed as a proof of concept, but it's hugely playable as well. Grab some friends and go hunting. **EL**

SIZE 130MB LINK *bit.ly/blmG0h*



2 Robotic resurrection

FREEWARE **MECHWARRIOR 4: MERCENARIES** IS NOW FREE

Microsoft has finally caved, permitting the free release of its 100-ton robot-bashing sim, *MechWarrior 4: Mercenaries*.

It's a copious package. A game of massive (if now slightly low-res) battlebots going metal to metal across varied and large arenas, but also an interesting sim with a few surprising additions.



You're in charge of a squad of mechs—a mercenary team that'll cause you to fret over their configuration, condition and costs. Things you probably didn't envision looking after when you first clapped eyes on these enormous metal buggers. But if *Mercenaries* is as much about management as mechanical mashing, it's a worry tempered by the choice you have over what missions to fight, when and where. If you need to buy a more powerful add-on, you can choose to take time-limited military missions that'll throw staggering amounts of ammo at you . You can coast easily through the standard battles, but that's just treading water. Or oil, possibly.

In battle, you'll have to ponder the systems of your mech, worrying about overheating your vast lasers while fighting off a valley stuffed with enemies, routing coolant and dodging missiles. And all the time, you've got a squad to order around on the battlefield.

It's a multilayered, complex and exciting robot stomper. Grab it now. **GS**

SIZE 1.2GB LINK *bit.ly/aeje4s*

3 BETA ATMOSPHIR

MAKING ALL OF YOUR WILDEST DREAMS COME TRUE, ALMOST.

Centipedes in spaaace...or giant crabs defending a life-size sandcastle, or taking on an ancient tomb with a lightsaber—*Atmosphir* provides a simple toolset of preprogramed objects that lets you create just about anything.

Currently in beta, it boasts over 23,400 user-created levels, multiplayer capture-the-flag and a four-player deathmatch mode in which you fight from inside a rotating cube as a cannon-wielding demon. Creating your own levels is as easy as grabbing objects—blocks, creatures, or giant eagle statues from the toolbox—and placing them on a plane (the surface kind).

With continued support, this burgeoning free-to-play (please add vehicles!) *Atmosphir* could generate a thriving community of armchair level-designers. **RH**

SIZE Browser-based LINK *http://beta.atmosphir.com/atmosphir/*



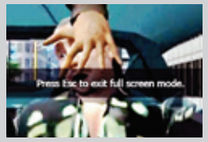
MACHINIMA

GMOD BRAWL: NIKO VS. ROMAN TAKES THE *GTA* COUSINS' BICKERING TO EXPLOSIVE HEIGHTS

"Let's play darts." "Let's play some videogames, man." "We should eat together." "You want to shoot some pool?" "We should go and get drunk together." A slapstick movie where Niko explodes with rage over Roman's constant calls. **CP** *bit.ly/9fvs4p*



Anger
1 Roman's continual abuse of Nico's time, and his ability to toss darts through IM video chats, ends in a brawl. Creator "kitty0706," uses GMod's spasmodic physics to fake the fighting.



Run away!
2 Roman flees in a car and Niko chases. He bounds from building to building until he spots his chance. Leaping onto the vehicle he uses a handy clipping error to reach through the car's roof.



Nico's funeral
3 Performed by Breen, attended by Roman, Sam Fisher, Altair and others. It ends with Nico exploding from the coffin, before an explosive priest rockets everyone to Valve's HQ.



End game
4 Sam Fisher shoots both Niko and Roman, but that's of no consequence. The cousins battle through the offices, roping in the *Left 4 Dead* characters. It ends with an airstrike from a UFO.

Make a map that conquers the galaxy

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy
TIME Four hours

VITAL LINKS

Mapping community resource with helpful forums
www.sc2mapster.com

StarCraft II map depository
bit.ly/nibbitsmaps

Blizzard devs talking about what makes a good map
bit.ly/dy4fLF

QUINTIN SMITH LEARNS THE BASICS OF **STARCRAFT II**'S GALAXY EDITOR

StarCraft II is going to be huge. Playing the beta, it's hard not to get the impression that you're standing at the bottom of an oversized dam that's making ominous groaning noises as cracks race across the concrete.

Traditionally, the sequels of successful games are hurriedly belched out by the developer. Thanks to Blizzard's laconic development style and eye for perfection, *StarCraft II* has taken closer to 11 years. The confidence behind this game is so strong that it's even being released as a trilogy, bolstering the unit roster and introducing a new single-player campaign with each release.

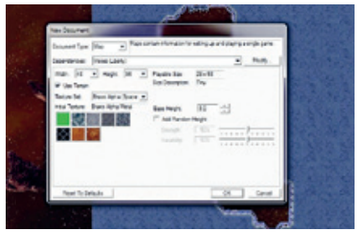
That's why I've started getting to grips with the Galaxy Map Editor, even though you can't currently play custom maps against other people. It's a kind of future-proofing to make sure I stay one step ahead of the rest of the aspiring map-makers out there.

If you've got access to the beta (or live version if you're reading this later) and feel like joining me, the following 12 steps will walk you through making your very own full-fledged 1v1 multiplayer map.



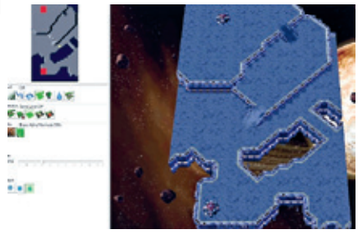
1 Cartography

Using a pencil and paper (or a tablet if you're from the future) figure out a rough sketch of your map. Necessary stuff which you should be sure to include: giving each starting base a single choke point and a natural expansion (an easy spot to build a second base), and, at least for your first design, making sure your map is symmetrical across a horizontal or vertical line as opposed to a diagonal. We'll get to that bit in a moment.



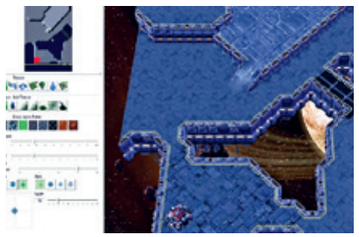
2 Attack parameters

Locate the *StarCraft II* Galaxy Map Editor in the game's installation directory. Once it's loaded go to File > New, and then enter the parameters of your map. 96x96 is a good size for a 1v1 map, so select 96x48, or 48x96. Why? Because we're going to design one half and flip it to create a mirrored half. Also, choose your texture set. For "Dependencies," choose "Melee (Liberty)." "Melee" means multiplayer, and "Liberty" refers to *Wings of Liberty*.



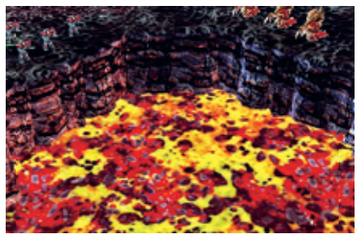
3 Cliff racer

Using the Brush selector on the left hand side of the screen, select "Cliff" and slice out the rough outlines and tiers of your map. If you try putting down a unit (such as my command centers, visible above) by clicking on "Layer" from the top menu and then the unit, you can see the edges of your map's play areas as opposed to the visual range. This is an important thing to know when marking out the edge of your map.



4 Brushing down

Still using the Terrain layer, select the Texture brush and paint your map with a variety of different textures. This is an entirely cosmetic process, but it's necessary to make sure your baby isn't as dismal as a month of Mondays. Note that you can use the Increment, Size, and Speed sliders to change your brush to something suitable for whatever task you're performing. The Shape and Style toggles are useful too.



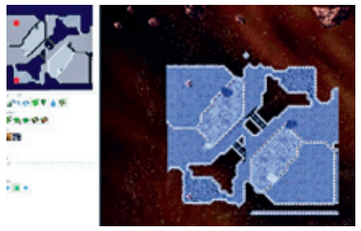
5 Moisten! Moisten!

Adding water to your map with the Water brush is more tricky. Currently you can only add water in enormous tiles and there's no way to change the map's overall water level. Water (or lava, if you chose the Volcanic texture set) appears between ground level and the first raised level. If you're making a water-focused map, brush the whole map with the cliff tool to bring the ground level of your map up to the first raised level.



6 Fearful symmetry

From the dropdown menu select "View," then "View Entire Map". This gives you a helpful top-down view. Now: time to mirror your map. Make sure you've got the Terrain layer activated. Choose "Selection Mode" from the Tools dropdown menu, and then either hit Ctrl+A or drag with the mouse to select your map, then hit Ctrl+C. Selected terrain can be seen with a green tint on the minimap.



7 The schizoid map

Go to Map > Map Bounds, check the Modify Map Bounds box and use the arrows to double the map's size in the appropriate direction, then hit OK. Finally, hit Ctrl+V, open the Edit menu and flip your copied area both horizontally and vertically and click to place it. Congratulations, you've made a terrible mess! Return to your old friends the texture and cliff tools to clean it up.



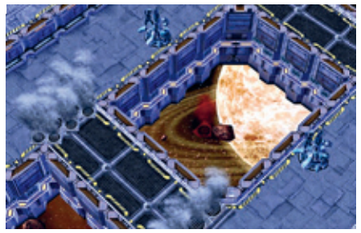
8 Making a deposit

Change to the Units layer. In the big list of units that appears on the left-hand side, locate the resources and place them on your map with simple left-clicks. Typical resource fields contain two vespene geysers and eight crystal fields. High-yield resource fields get two vespene geysers and six rich mineral fields. Be as careful as you can to ensure identical resource placement on either side.



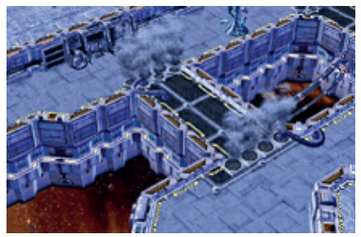
9 Turn up the base

Select "Map," then "Player Properties" from the top menu. Set Player 2's control to "User." In this case, we're making a simple multiplayer map without hostile NPC units, so set the control on #15 ("Hostile") to "None" and hit OK to close Player Properties. Now select "Layers," then "Points" and ignore the error message. Click "Start Location" on the left-hand side of the screen, and then click once where each player's command building should go.



10 Things of liberty

The special, tactical terrain objects that *StarCraft II* introduces should be placed now. Xel'Naga Watchtowers and destructible rocks and barricades can be found in the Units layer. View-blockers such as smoking vents or tall plants can be found in the Doodads layer. When placing destructible barricades, check that units can't go sauntering around them. *StarCraft II*'s grid-based movement allows units to squeeze through gaps you might not expect.



11 Prettification

Time to add cosmetic doodads. These little touches turn a map into a real place. Using the Doodads layer to add doodads to your map will be intuitive at this point, but fiddling with the doodads won't be. To rotate them with the mouse, enter Selection mode (Spacebar), select a doodad and hold Ctrl. This is especially important with cliffside objects. To make a doodad bigger or smaller, select it and choose "Modify Properties" from the Edit menu.



12 Lock and loading

Click on the furthest right button on the toolbar to test your map! Hooray! And consequently discover, with mounting horror, that your map feels at once too empty and too cramped, and "flows" like a clogged faucet. Some heavy redesigning is inevitable, but that's the fun part. Just make sure you make the same changes to each side, or Blizzard's Dustin Browder will weep at the years of meticulous balancing you're wasting.

SKILLS

HIDE AND SEEK

TIPS FOR *SPLINTER CELL: CONVICTION*'S CO-OP MODE



1 Targets you mark can be seen by both your partner and you, so even when you're way out of range, get into the habit of swapping to sonar goggles, marking everybody in sight and not executing them. This prevents nasty surprises.



2 Clear enemies by the room, not individually. Patience, child! *Conviction* is half a puzzle game, after all. Sneak into a position where you'll be able to execute everybody in quick succession so no one can radio for help.



3 Splitting up is smarter than squatting in the darkness together like a couple of weirdos. You're lethal as a pair, but twice as likely to get spotted if guards come investigating. Work your way through paths or floors separately.

BONUS SKILL

STAND UP STRAIGHT

For the trickier Last Stand mode, position your partner away from the EMP. If enemies get close, have him fire a noisy gun to lure them away.



The Hard Stuff

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

TESTED

GeForce GTX 480

Nvidia



Hot stuff.

I remember going to parties as a young boy and watching high-strung parents lecture the hosts before giving up their kids: *If you frustrate him, William will sometimes squeeze his eyes shut very hard and won't open them again. Is your house dusty? Margaret is very sensitive to dust.* The inference was almost always that if the kids were unhappy, then the hosts were somehow to blame. I got that feeling when Nvidia hesitated to send *PC Gamer* a GeForce GTX 480 sample; not before warnings and disclaimers and a review of my test bed and procedures.

It was uncharacteristically uptight of the usually confident company, but now I get why—for one thing, the 10.5-inch GTX 480 (1.5GB model tested) sucks down power like a melancholy drunk at an open bar. Nvidia recommends a minimum 600W PSU for the GTX 480, and I'd be wary of anything less than a 1000W PSU for dual GTX 480s. A by-product of this

It's needy, whiny, and runs a temperature. But it's still a tremendously powerful card.

ravenous consumption is, of course, heat, and Nvidia cautions that its li'l 480 would prefer to be stationed at least one full slot away from another 480.

But even a single card exhausts enormous amounts of heat at full load (enough to save studio apartment dwellers a few bucks in winter-time). It's also extremely loud, and the GTX 480 may test the toler-ance of even seasoned PC gamers tolerant of the huffing and puffing of interior fans.

So, yes, the GTX 480 is needy, whiny and runs a temperature. But it's still a tremendously powerful card, DirectX 11-compatible and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the Radeon 5970 in the benchmarks. It's also a very promising *foundation* for the near future as early tests with dual 480s are exceptional, and dual 480s are required for Nvidia Surround, which enables triple-monitor 3D gaming and might–*might*–be the most lustworthy item on every hardcore gamer's Christmas list this year (come back next month for the review).

As is, however, it's a powerful card that's simply outclassed by the magnificent Radeon 5970—a GPU that deals you virtually the same performance and features at a lower price. That the GTX 480 gets a relatively low score should, in my opinion, be regarded more as a testament to ATI's ambitiousness and cleverness than to Nvidia's lack thereof. It's still a capable card that just needs the right introduction for you to see past its quirks. **LD**

$500, 1.5GB model (MSRP), pny.com

Benchmarks

	3DMark06	Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode 1	World in Conflict: Soviet Assault	Supreme Commander
Nvidia GeForce GTX 480 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	**20351**	P17562	**80fps**/54/35	283fps/282/227	66fps/58/42	**57fps/55**/53
ATI Radeon 5970 HD 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	20129	**P20053**	68fps/**65/42**	**285fps/284/280**	**79fps/75/58**	55fps/53/**54**
ATI 5870 HD 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	19211	P16472	73fps/50/31	265fps/263/215	60fps/53/38	55fps/54/51

VERDICT

It's bone-liquefying fast, but you get just about the same speed in a less demanding design and cheaper price with the Radeon 5970 HD.

PC GAMER 81

Q&A

Stating the rating



RAM designations appear to have been designed to promote terror.

Q: Why is RAM referred to in two different ways? I've upgraded to Windows 7 and now I want to splurge on 12GB of RAM, but some vendors list it as DDR3-1333 and others list it as PC3-10600. I can guess that DDR3-1600 is faster than DDR3-1333, but why is that kind of RAM also called PC3-12800, and why isn't there a standard way of referring to all RAM?

A: *Now there's an eternal question: Why isn't there a standard way of doing things? You'd think that manufacturers would have learned their lesson over the Seagate lawsuit settled in 2007 over the definition of a gigabyte. (Seagate's based its storage capacity figures on the decimal definition of a gigabyte, which is 1 billion bytes. But most operating systems reported storage using the binary definition of a gigabyte, which is 1,073,741,824 bytes. That's a whopping seven percent difference in capacity available to the consumer.)*

On the other hand, the RAM naming conventions you're confused over are nowhere near as big a deal—the two terms are interchangeable. Most vendors use the DDR3-xxxx convention; this means that the RAM chips inside the module are capable of operating at 1333 MT/s (megatransfers per second). Don't be freaked out by the "megatransfers" thing—it effectively means clock speed. The PC3-10600 figure, on the other hand, refers to the theoretical bandwidth of the entire RAM module you're holding in your hands, which is 10667 MB/s (megabytes per second).

Why do some vendors use this figure instead of the other one at the retail counter? Dunno. Maybe it's because bigger numbers look sexier.

Hard Stuff Trinity

DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE AND PSU Cooler Master Cosmos; 850W PSU	$300	**CASE AND PSU** Nzxt Alpha; Gamexstream 700W PSU	$187	**CASE AND PSU** Generic Case; Corsair 450W PSU	$161
PROCESSOR Intel Core i7-950 3.06GHz	$550	**PROCESSOR** Intel Core i7-920 2.66GHz	$256	**PROCESSOR** AMD Athlon X2 6000+ 3.0GHz	$57
MOTHERBOARD Asus P6T Deluxe V2	$262	**MOTHERBOARD** Asus P6T	$244	**MOTHERBOARD** Asus M3A76-CM	$68
MEMORY Corsair 6GB DDR3-1600	$154	**MEMORY** Corsair 6GB DDR3-1333	$178	**MEMORY** Corsair 2GB DDR2-800	$58
OPTICAL DRIVE LG BD370 Blu-ray	$174	**OPTICAL DRIVE** LG GH22NP20	$25	**OPTICAL DRIVE** Sony DDU1681S	$19
HARD DRIVE Intel X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM	$311	**HARD DRIVE** WD 500GB 7200RPM	$50	**HARD DRIVE** WD 250GB 7200RPM	$40
SOUNDCARD Creative Labs X-Fi Titanium	$130	**SOUNDCARD** Onboard	$0	**SOUNDCARD** Onboard	$0
VIDEOCARD Radeon HD5870 (2)	$780	**VIDEOCARD** Radeon HD 5870	$399	**VIDEOCARD** GeForce GT 220	$65
TOTAL PRICE	**$2,661**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$1,339**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$468**

TESTED

Armor A90 Chassis

Thermaltake

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

My first PC case was a functional but boring beige box, so thoughtlessly designed that the interior edges could have taken skin off. But if that case had shacked up and had a baby with a B-2 Stealth bomber, the child would turn out something like the Armor A90—a sleek, almost sinister chassis that's compact yet surprisingly roomy inside.

The chassis isn't just attractive on the outside: even the interior has a lustrous black, matte paint job that any action-movie hacker would kill for. But it's the design that's truly exceptional. The motherboard, for example, has an access hole cut for getting at the back of the CPU (to install a fan or water-cooling block) without having to remove the motherboard itself! Two 12-inch video cards could sit comfortably inside without blocking other components, and the tool-less drive bays (six HD/SSD, three optical) make swapping optical drives or adding a solid-state drive a breeze. There's also a surprising amount of room behind the drives and motherboard for space for tucking away cables and wires that block airflow.

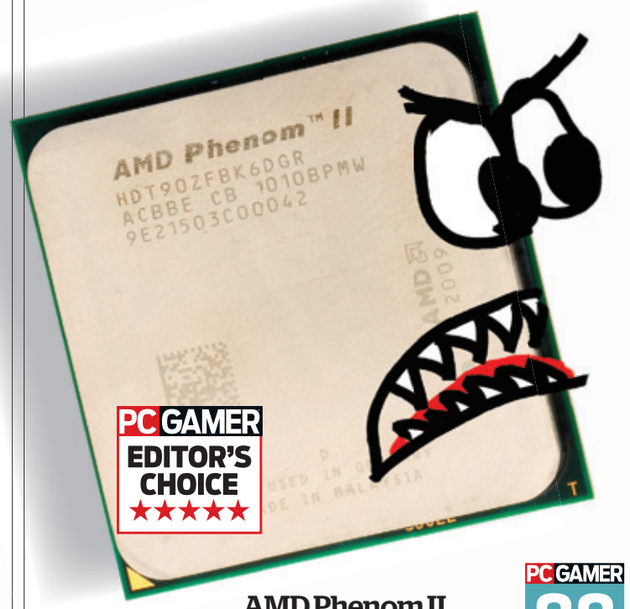


Case-a-gami.

The case front has mounts for two 120mm fans, but only comes with one; there's also a mount for a side-panel fan, but that isn't included either. But the A90 does include large top and rear fans, which should be enough if you aren't running more than one video card with no overclocking. Despite the omission of a couple fans, the Armor A90 is one of the best mid-tower cases you can get for under $100. **EB**

PC GAMER 90

$90, thermaltakeusa.com



PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

AMD Phenom II X6 1090T

PC GAMER 88

Hexa War!

Two CPUs, 12 Cores— *ONE WINNER*

Intel has been pummeling AMD for years with the dazzling performance of its Core family of processors, and the hexacore (six CPU cores on a single die) Core-i7 980X raised the performance ceiling even higher—if you could afford it. But instead of retreating or blaming the mainstream media for its woes, AMD regrouped and shot back with a hexacore proc of its own, the Phenom II X6 1090T, at just over a quarter the price of the Core i7-980X. They are, of course, two different processors intended for two different audiences, but if you're less worried about retail prices and more concerned about getting the absolute most proc rock for your buck, *PC Gamer* runs the numbers. ***Erik Belsaas***

Power Struggle

When it comes to raw computing power, the Intel has the clear advantage. The 980x runs at 3.33GHz, packs a mighty 12MB L3 cache (resulting in faster repeat calculations), and Hyper-Threading technology allows the six cores to be split into 12 "threads," which allows the CPU to juggle a dozen processes at once. The X6 1090T clocks in slightly slower at 3.2GHz, with 6MB of L3 cache onboard. Multithreaded benchmarks (which can utilize more than a single core) show the difference, with the Core i7-980X more than doubling the X6 1090T's CPU Score in Vantage.

While there's no question that it's the GPU that makes the bulk of the difference in games, a powerful CPU can still pay off big. *Half-Life 2* on the Core i7-980X, for example, showed a nice jump in FPS over the X6 1090T, and *Crysis* had similar, if far less dramatic, results. *DiRT 2*, on the other hand, fared better on the X6 1090T than on the Core i7-980x. Optimizations? Voodoo? At any rate, the performance gap wasn't humungous.

Turbo!

Not every game takes advantage of multiple cores, much less six of them, but both AMD and Intel procs still pay dividends in these cases. AMD's "Turbo Core" detects when the thread load is light and collectively overclocks three of its cores from the standard 3.2GHz to 3.6GHz, providing a boost to single- or double-threaded applications. Intel takes the process one step further with Turbo Boost, which selectively overclocks the cores in use, so older games that using one or two cores will ratchet the CPU from 3.33GHz to 3.6GHz.

Socket to me

AMD deserves serious praise for the longevity of its AM2+/AM3 socket, now in its fourth year of service. If you've got an AM2+ or AM3 motherboard, all you need is a simple BIOS update to prep it for the X6 1090T. Outstanding. Unfortunately, the same can't be said of Intel, as the Core i7-980X requires a socket LGA 1366 motherboard, which have only been around for a year now and will be a considerable additional expense if you don't already have a compatible motherboard. One thing to keep in mind if you're upgrading to an X6 1090T is that the processor runs at 125W, so be certain that your motherboard supports this amount of juice before you upgrade.

The verdict

There's no question that the Core i7-980x represents the state-of-the-art in consumer CPUs. But is state-of-the-art what you really want? Or are you willing to go with a slightly more limited processor at a far, far lower price? A $1,000 processor remains excessive for gamers who don't also use their PCs for processor-intensive tasks such as video editing or 3D rendering. The X6 1090T, on the other hand, is more than capable of tackling whatever you throw at it while leaving you $700 richer (or with extra dough for additional RAM and a faster GPU—which are more likely to pay off in games than a faster CPU).

Of course, CPUs get faster and cheaper every year, and you could realize the same benefit by getting your mitts on a cheaper Intel Core proc such as the Core i7-920 (hovering around $225 at press time). But if you need—or if you just *want*—the advantages of a powerful six-core processor, AMD's the way to go. ■



PC GAMER 77

Intel Core i7-980X

HEXA-WHAT? HOW MULTICORE WORKS

Let's say we're a contractor remodeling a house. We could instruct our staff to do one thing at a time (install plumbing, wire for electricity, paint the interior), but the job would be finished much quicker if the we separated out tasks that could be done at the same time and had our crew work in unison. That's the idea behind multi-core processing, where the CPU is the contractor dividing and distributing jobs to teams. The end result is less time waiting and more time gaming!

MOTHERBOARD MATCHING

AMD: ASUS Crosshair IV Formula-AM3-AMD 890FX



42 PCI-E 2.0 lanes means that the new 890FX chipset from AMD can handle the massive traffic generated by multiple, high-end GPUs and expansion cards. $200. Alternatively, MSi 890 FXA-GD70

Intel: MSI X58 XPower



A built in X-Fi card, easy overclocking, and versatile power options make for a ultra-functional motherboard, albeit a pricey one at $320. Alternatively, ASUS P6X58D.

SPECS ◆ **AMD PHENOM II** ◆ **Price** $280 ◆ **URL** amd.com ◆ **Category** Mid
INTEL 980X ◆ **Price** $1000 ◆ **URL** intel.com ◆ **Category** Dream

MULTICORE GAMES

Multi-core procs are so common these days that it's no longer unusual for a game to support them. Here's a brief list of games that benefit the most from multi-core processors.

Crysis/Crysis Warhead
Napoleon: Total War
Left 4 Dead 2 ▸
Supreme Commander 2
Unreal Tournament 3
Modern Warfare 2
Battlefield: Bad Company 2



Benchmarks

	3DMark06 (CPU Score)	Vantage (CPU Score)	DiRT2	Half-Life 2: Episode 1	Crysis
Intel Core i7-980X 1920x1080/1680x1050	**23784 (8672)**	**P18371 (34527)**	52fps/56	**182fps/219**	**55fps/62**
AMD Phenom II X6 1090T 1920x1080/1680x1050	19893 (5771)	P16238 (15956)	**58fps/61**	152fps/153	51fps/56



WHITE-COLLAR CRIMINALS

Unscrupulous businessraptors bankrupted the small town of Crossroads, stealing their silver and investing it in the construction of cheaply-made raptor tract homes—complete with bone wind chimes and hanging corpse decorations (how did they tie the rope?).



ACCOMPLISHED ARTISTS

Baby raptors in Un'goro Crater use the highest form of self-expression to manipulate Horde players—drawing pictures of what they want and growling. Their equally-refined fashion sense makes them quite picky about which feathers they attach to their armbands.

Raptors!

More devious than the Lich King, more unescapable than the cataclysm—raptors have always been the greatest threat in *WoW*; we just never realized it. Here are four signs of the impending raptor apocalypse



MERCENARIES FOR HIRE

In the *Night of Dragons* novel, a raptor army (led by their raptor king) is recruited by über-mage Rhonin to kill one of the most powerful dragons in existence. Even more terrifying is the consistent account of the raptors' ability to immediately "materialize" behind enemies in battle.



HIDING IN YOUR POCKETS

Our hunters enslave their brethren; our pet collectors steal their young; we put silly circus balls on their horns and ride them as mounts. Did you think that they've forgiven? That they've forgotten? Raptors do not forgive or forget. They're infiltrating our beds and will strike when we least expect it.